POSTSCHOOL OUTCOMES OF YOUNG ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES: ATTRIBUTIONS OF PROGRAM IMPACT

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how the educational experiences of nine graduates of a transition program located in a public university in the Southeastern United States impacted their postschool outcomes in areas of employment, independent living, and the social realm. Utilizing the Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model both as a conceptual framework and an analytic tool to explore and frame the meanings participants attached to their lived experiences as graduates of the transition program, this study attempted to understand how the participants attributed their current lives to their experiences, preparation, and lessons learned while in the program. The nine participants all had intellectual disability, ranged in age from 22 to 32 years, and came from varying demographic backgrounds with regard to race, gender, and social economic backgrounds. Two rounds of interviews were conducted with each participant to arrive at an understanding of how they viewed the program, their experiences in it, themselves, their lives, and the relationship between all of these aspects. The phenomenological research perspective was used to understand the meanings participants gave to their current and imagined lives and how they related their current lives to lessons learned in the program. Findings revealed the program had profound effects on graduates and their outcomes in areas of employment, independent living, and the social realm were significantly greater and more positive than peers with similar disabling conditions as evidenced in literature. The participants described non-conventional outcomes not typical of same-age peers with intellectual disabilities.
DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my family. I greatly appreciate their unwavering support throughout this process. This includes my wife Krista, my mother Ann, my father Geoff, my brother Alex, my grandfathers Davis and Vernon, my grandmothers Elvie and Faye, and my in-laws Paul and Marilyn. In times of uncertainty, they saw potential in me that I did not see in myself.
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CHAPTER I:
INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

In 1990, the Education of All Handicapped Act of 1975 was amended and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Among the mandates of IDEA (1990) was transition services for secondary special education students. This legislation outlined the definition of transition services and made them a required component of the Individualized Education Program (IEP). IDEA made it the job of public schools to prepare students with disabilities for adult life (Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, & Park, 2003). The cornerstones of the IDEA of 1990 include postsecondary education, vocational training, integrated employment, continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, and community participation.

Transition planning, according to IDEA of 2004, is a process required for all students with an IEP ages 16-21 years. The overarching purpose of transition as defined in the IDEA of 1990 and its subsequent amendments (1997; 2004) is to facilitate the student’s movement, or transition, from school to post-school activities and life. IDEA 2004 has clearly and explicitly defined this process through mandatory requirements. According to IDEA 2004, a transition plan is required to include the following: (a) be in place before the student is 16 years of age; (b) be individualized to that student specifically, that reflects the student’s strengths, preferences, and interests; and (c) include opportunities to develop functional skills for work and community living. Furthermore, IDEA (2004) mandates specify the Individualized Education Program (IEP) transition team membership. The role of the transition team in the IEP is to develop the student’s
transition plan. The transition team is comprised of the student, parents, special education teacher, general education teacher, school administrator and optional inputs by employers, college representatives, and student advocates. It is the task of the transition team to identify what the student envisions him or herself doing after high school, discuss the academic and functional capabilities of the student, identify age-appropriate goals, define and establish services designed to build on the student’s strengths while identifying needed accommodations, and define each transition activity on the IEP while deciding who is responsible for the activity and when each activity will begin and end (IDEA, 2004).

Today, nearly three decades since the passage of the transition mandates in IDEA of 1990, postschool outcomes of students with disabilities continue to lag behind those of their nondisabled peers. Evidence from early studies of transition suggests schools, as well as the national education system as a whole, are not preparing students adequately for the outcomes society expects from them (Toch, 1991). Studies show special education students have high rates of unemployment, dropping out, and general lack of societal engagement after exiting from school (Browning, Dunn, Rabren, & Whetstone, 1996). Individuals with intellectual disabilities have lower employment percentages, lower school attendance, and lower reported quality of life when compared to their nondisabled peers (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Fabian, Lent, & Willis, 1998; Fairweather & Shaver, 1991; Haring, Lovett, & Smith, 1990; U.S. Department of Education, 2001; NLTS-2, 2009). When comparing these two groups, individuals with disabilities are also more likely to drop out of high school and be employed below their ability level (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Edgar, 1987; U.S. Department of Education, 2001; NLTS-2, 2009).
The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS-1, 1993; NLTS-2, 2009) is the most comprehensive academic research effort in the field of transition. It has two versions; NLTS-1 (1993) and NLTS-2 (2009). These studies have helped shape transition efforts by providing insight into performance and outcomes of students with intellectual disabilities after they leave school. They both used school records, parent and student interviews, and surveys to gather data. The NLTS-1 had four areas of inquiry: student characteristics, secondary school attended, postschool outcomes, and independent living profiles. NLTS-1 had four major findings regarding the areas of inquiry. (1) The majority of secondary school students with disabilities had cognitive learning problems. More than half were classified as learning disabled and almost one fourth were classified as having intellectual disabilities. One in ten had serious emotional disturbances and physical and sensory impairments were low-incidence disabilities. (2) Youth with disabilities differed from their peers in the general population in ways other than having a disability. They were more likely than typical students to be male, poor, African-American, and from single parent households. (3) Negative outcomes were associated with demographic factors were disproportionate among youth with disabilities. (4) Disability and aspects of economic disadvantage combined to create significant functional deficits for secondary school students in special education. The average IQ of a student with a disability was 79. Measures of self-care abilities, functional mental skills, and community living skills showed a sizable minority of youth whose parents reported they had some difficulty with these tasks. The NLTS-2 study took place between 2000-2009 and showed similarly results regarding the population of students with special needs in terms of their postschool outcomes.

Collectively, the NLTS-1 and NLTS-2 studies have demonstrated many graduates of special education secondary programs are not employed, do not live on their own, have not
become an engaged and meaningful part of the community, and are unsatisfied with their social lives. Similar findings were reported in the years preceding the passage of 1990 IDEA (Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985). Additionally, Halloran (1993) found similarly negative outcomes for large numbers of adults who were graduates of special education who were living segregated, dependent, and largely nonproductive lives.

Statement of the Problem

The post-school outcomes of students with disabilities are often dismal as evidenced in the studies cited previously. Evidence suggests schools, as well as the national education system as a whole, are not preparing students adequately for the outcomes society expects from them (Toch, 1991; U.S. Department of Education, 2001; Flexer, Baer, Luft, & Simmons, 2013). Studies have shown special education students have high rates of unemployment, dropping out, and general lack of societal engagement after exiting from school (Browning, Dunn, Rabren, & Whetstone, 1996; Department of Education, 2001; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005; NLTS-2, 2009). Compared to their nondisabled peers, disabled individuals continually have lower employment percentages, lower school attendance, and lower reported quality of life when compared to their nondisabled peers (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Fabian, Lent, & Willis, 1998; Fairweather & Shaver, 1991; Haring, Lovett, & Smith, 1990; U.S. Department of Education, 2001; Browning, 2002; NLTS-2, 2009; Flexer, Baer, Luft, & Simmons, 2013).

In response to the dismal outcomes experienced by a large majority of graduates of special education programs, various models of transition services have emerged in schools across the country in an effort to reverse this outlook. For instance, RiverPass (pseudonym) is a model transition program consisting of a partnership between a southeastern United States flagship institution of higher education (IHE), a local city school system, and a local county school
system. The purpose of RiverPass is to provide transition services and multifaceted education for students with disabilities ages 18-21. The multifaceted education they receive is not limited to classroom instruction alone. The educational experience focuses on the development of skills such as job training, social development, independent living, technological training, self-advocacy, community involvement, citizenship, sexuality, decision making, and functional academics. Students also receive training and education in vocational and employment aspects of transition in specially selected or assigned job sites at the IHE or in the surrounding community. The students work three-hour shifts Monday through Thursday on- or off-campus while receiving instruction in employment related skills and some functional academics related to community involvement, social life, citizenship and independent living skills. Students in the program attend classes in IHE’s state of the art campus as well as receive employment training at job sites on and off campus.

RiverPass has, for the past three years, been my employer through a graduate assistantship. My job assignment has included roles in teaching classes on sexuality, community involvement, decision making, communication skills, traditional academic subjects, technology, career exploration, and self-advocacy, as well as other in-class and job site instruction. I also work with the students at some of the job sites on-campus the university provides each semester in the role of a job coach. Most students will have had roughly six different job experiences prior to graduation as RiverPass is a three-year program with each year consisting of two semesters. While overall, the RiverPass program has yielded significantly higher post-school outcomes for its graduates compared to the national average, what is still unknown are the attributions program graduates make of their post-school outcomes.
Research Question

What do the narratives of RiverPass program graduates reveal about the extent to which they attribute their post-school outcomes to their experiences in the program in the areas of 1) employment; 2) independent living; and 3) social realm?

Purpose of the Study

The overarching purpose of this study was to understand the post school outcomes of graduates of RiverPass, a model transition program that is located at an institution of higher education (IHE) in the southeastern United States. Specifically drawing upon narratives of a purposively-selected sample (Patton, 1990, 2002; Kuzel, 1999) of RiverPass program graduates, this study interrogated their attributions of achieving IDEA-defined post-school outcomes in areas of employment, independent living, and social realm. The lens used for this project was Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model. I focused on graduates in order to see not only where they are in life, but to more importantly to hear first-hand how they connected their post-school outcomes to their educational experience and preparation by the RiverPass program.

There have been numerous success stories in terms of RiverPass graduates attaining employment, independent living, relationships and achieving their stated post-school goals. What exactly do these students say was done differently from their peers in other transition programs that made it possible for them to achieve these outcomes? How are the outcomes of different RiverPass graduates inter-related? I was also interested in understanding the interconnectedness of the IDEA-defined post-school outcomes of RiverPass program graduates by race, gender, ruralarity, disability.

Post-school outcomes as defined by IDEA and these four demographic factors are heavily linked through a dependent relationship with one another. Indeed, the Alabama Transition
Initiative (ATI) (Rabren, Dunn, & Chambers, 2002), an effort to track the outcomes of students with intellectual disabilities that attended high schools in Alabama between 1996 and 2000, is particularly significant to the current study. It is one of the few documented studies that can potentially yield region-specific information with regards to RiverPass students. This study found work and school outcomes for all students can differ based on geographic location. The study primarily dealt with two variables: demographics and post-school outcomes. Participants in the ATI program were from 37 of Alabama’s 128 public school systems. The 37 selected school systems received grants in order to enhance their respective transition programs. They enhanced their programs through implementing a group of best practices and willingly participating in the Alabama Student Tracking System. The curriculum reform aspect of the ATI program required students attain paid employment experience during their last year of high school. This turned out to be a greatly beneficial aspect of the program.

From the year 1996 - 2000, 2,829 students with disabilities graduated from schools participating in the ATI program. Of these 2,829 students, 1,393 responded after leaving school as to whether or not they had a job. The study included five demographic aspects which lend insight into how post-school employment is attained and held. The five aspects were school setting, gender, race, disability condition, and exit status. The ATI program study found white males with learning disabilities had a higher probability of having a job one year after high school graduation than their peers with other disabilities. Furthermore, the odds of a graduate having a job one year after leaving school was 2.5 times greater for students from urban settings compared to their rural counterparts. They were also 2.3 times more likely to be employed than females and 2.1 times more likely compared to students with disabilities that were not classified as learning. The most startling statistic was students that had a job when they graduated were 5.1
times more likely to have a job one year after school than those who did not have a job when graduating. An interesting fact coming from the study which was unexpected by the researchers was students receiving community and government services were actually less likely to have a job one year after school than those not receiving any type of services. Overall, the odds of a male having a job one year after graduating were higher than females in every demographic situation. Gender, race, ruralarity, job status, and disability are seemingly all heavily associated with post-school outcomes and quality of life. Clearly what is missing in this study were student narratives.

The study focused on questions which connect program features to specific student post-school outcomes. We do not know the status of every graduate from the RiverPass program and thus cannot measure its true effectiveness in terms of long-term outcomes. The essential elements of transitions education as defined in IDEA are too overarching and thus do not include a complete depiction of each student’s experience. They do not tell each student’s unique life story; they are simply categories trying to capture a fluid existence. What about significant events, relationships, satisfaction with employment, and/or other things that cannot be quantified as IDEA mandates suggest? It is my interest to study these soft outcomes of IDEA transition research often misses when discussing post-school outcomes of students with disabilities. Such outcomes can only be captured through individual student unique narratives.

**Theoretical Model**

The theoretical model I chose for my project was Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model. This model is directly applicable to the RiverPass program because the program is based upon a variation of Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model. The IDEA of 1990 pulled much of its terminology and its definition of transition services from Halpern’s model (Johnson &
Rusch, 1993). It is undoubtedly one of the most significant and prolific transition models considering the impact it had on the definition of transition services. This framework builds on Madeline Will’s Bridges model focused primarily on employment as the foundation to the transition experience and adds the residential and interpersonal domains (Halpern, 1985). Halpern claimed community adjustment would be the foundation to the transition process and three pillars would build upon this foundation. The pillars he proposed were employment, residential environment, and social and interpersonal networks. Halpern’s reconceptualization also pushed strongly for quality of life as an indicator of the success of the transition process. Simply having a job, which was the basis for Will’s model, was not enough to gauge the transition process and quality of life for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Job status, according to Halpern, while important, was just a piece or one third of the transition into adulthood. With community adjustment as the base, employment, residential environment, and social networks acting as pillars, and quality of life as a rubric, Halpern conceptualized the model would be used by many in the field. Students, families, schools, and educators continue to use his model today and the RiverPass program operates through a variant of this model. Halpern saw his model connecting the hands of schools and community adult service organizations in an attempt to create or continue a good quality of life for the individual. He saw the community and local social welfare programs as essential to the transition process and saw great value in employment training and postsecondary education opportunities.

The Community Adjustment Model was similar to a career education model and was more than just schools handing off the student (Halpern, 1992). Career education models were introduced by the Career Education Implementation Incentive Act of 1978. The legislation created a comprehensive model designed to take children all the way to adulthood. Career
education models were systematic, developmental, focused on self-awareness, and oriented to a wide range of occupations (Flexer, Baer, Luft, & Simmons, 2013). These models spanned all grade K-12 and were used for both special needs and regular education students; they are also used at RiverPass. The broad curriculum of career education models was used to develop the Life-Centered Career Education (LCCE) model. LCCE identified 22 competencies which were designed to build on each other and be spread throughout elementary, middle, and high school. This curriculum explored the major life areas of work, home, and academic learning (Brolin & Lloyd, 2004). This is very closely related to another career education model known as the School-Based Career Development and Transition Education Model. Focusing on student skill and support, the School-Based Career Development and Transition Education Model explored the domains of employment, further education, daily living, leisure activity, community participation, health, self-determination, communication, and interpersonal relationships (Sitlington, Neubert, & Clark, 2010). This was also designed as a long-term curriculum for multiple ages and students with and without disabilities.

Halpern’s work on his transition model has its roots in the policies defined by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), by which a model of transition was created. The OSERS model saw transition as a series of bridges, not totally unlike Will’s model, but in terms of service needs for special needs students. The primary goal of the OSERS model was employment and that was the ideal end results with little regard to anything else in the person’s life. Halpern saw this as incomplete and incomprehensive and while he admitted employment was certainly important, it was only one aspect of life. He introduced his Community Adjustment Model with employment being one of the three pillars of the model along with social and interpersonal networks and residential environment (Halpern, 1985).
These were all part of the overall community adjustment of the individual, which he viewed as the overall goal of transition. Halpern argued if any one of the pillars failed in his model, the probability of the transition process crashing down was high. The individual’s ability to thrive in the community would then be at risk. The first pillar of employment, per Halpern’s model, included job related aspects such as employment networks, job skills, job searching skills, employers, unemployment, and occupational discrimination. His second pillar, encompassing residential environment, included aspects such as living arrangements, home satisfaction, quality, safety, location, recreational opportunities, and community services within close proximity. The third pillar of the social and interpersonal, Halpern argued, was the most important of all three pillars. This pillar includes important aspects of human relationships, communication, feelings, emotions, family support, self-esteem, maturity, intimate relationships, and friendships (Halpern, 1985). Perhaps the most interesting thing Halpern discovered in his research of this model, however, was success in one or more of the pillars had little effect on success in the others. This went against the OSERS position as well as Will’s theory of transition. The uncovering of this aspect surprised Halpern as well. Halpern interviewed individuals with disabilities in Washington, Oregon, California, and Colorado and compared responses between all three dimensions. The data showed the strongest element of community adjustment along all three pillars was the quality and amount of communication between schools and community transition agencies (Halpern, 1985).

Halpern’s definition of transition built upon OSERS’ and Will’s to include community adjustment as the end game goal. His 1985 view coupled the newer residential and interpersonal realms with the known occupational realm to form his idea of transition. He went on, in 1989, to expand his Community Adjustment Model to include important personal development aspects to
his model. His adding of aspects like self-esteem, goal setting, and decision making helped empower the individual by giving them increased understanding, meaning, and ownership of their situations, and thus, quality of life (Whetstone & Browning, 2002). This addition contributed to each person’s quality of life. Based upon the Career Education and Will’s Bridges Model, Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model continues to be relevant today. This model has been accepted as the overall framework for defining transition in the IDEA, with all three pillars being dominant transition goals (Johnson & Rusch, 1993).

Within the contexts of transition and Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model comes a need for the understanding of the interconnected aspects of all three pillars. Halpern’s research not only measures transition in terms of community adjustment via occupation, living situation, and social activity, but also through quality of life. Therefore, it takes some investigation as to what this actually means and how it can be applied to the transition process. According to Halpern, the actual definition of transition has evolved and is fluid.

In its generic sense, transition refers to that period of time during which students leave school and begin to assume adult roles in their communities. In recent years, however, the term has also been adopted as a label for a specific program of federal support that was designed to enhance transition programs and services for adolescents and young adults with disabilities. The federal program began in 1984 (Will, 1984; Halpern, 1985). There were several important antecedent programs, however, which began during the 1960’s and laid the foundation for current efforts. The most important of these antecedent programs were called “work-study” and “career education” programs. (Halpern, 1994, p.194-195)

Each of these programs had their own set of goals and frameworks which allowed for different interpretations of quality of life. Work-study programs first appeared in the 1960s and coupled with academic and social curriculums, gave students the opportunity to have work experience through immersion. These programs were designed to help students to prepare for community adjustment into adulthood. The schools usually had written contracts with rehab
agencies that formed the basic bond these programs were built upon (Halpern, 1973, 1974; Kolstoe & Frey, 1965). These programs found grounding in an era in which students with disabilities occupied curriculums full of remedial academics; they basically had no practical subjects, vocational skills, or independent living skills (Halpern, 1994). These programs were designed to ease students into adult life and into the community, but aspects of quality of life, living, and social life were simply inferred and never precisely described. The primary objective of the work-study programs was employment; this was also the primary objective of the rehab agencies working with the schools. The 1970s saw an end to this movement in favor of the newer career education programs and the associated movement. Career education programs came from legislation unlike the basic community relationships that forged the previous movement.

The 1977 Career Education Implementation Incentive Act was responsible for the start of career education programs. This legislation looked at the post-school lives of all students, regardless of whether or not they were disabled. These programs had goals of preparing students for jobs and adult living and relied on the Council on Exceptional Children’s definition. It states,

Career education is the totality of experiences through which one learns to live a meaningful, satisfying work life. Within the career education framework, work is conceptualized as conscious effort aimed at producing benefits for oneself and for others. Career education provides the opportunity for children to learn, in the least restrictive environment possible, the academic, daily living, personal-social and occupational knowledge and specific vocational work skills necessary for attaining their highest levels of economic, personal, and social fulfillment. The individual can obtain this fulfillment through work (both paid and unpaid) and in a variety of other societal roles and personal life styles including his/her pursuits as a student, citizen, volunteer, family member, and participant in meaningful leisure time activities. (Halpern, 1994, p. 196)

These programs ended in the early 1980s and the transition movement, as we know it today, emerged in its place.
Halpern’s view of quality of life, most associated with his transition model, could also be applied to the first two movements. His definition contains three domains and 15 types of outcomes divided between them. The domains are physical and material well-being, performance of adult roles, and personal fulfillment. The first domain, physical and material well-being, contains the outcomes of 1) physical and mental health; 2) food, clothing and lodging; 3) safety from harm; and 4) financial security. The second domain, performance of adult roles, contains eight types of outcomes: 1) mobility and community access; 2) vocation, career, employment; 3) leisure and recreation; 4) personal relationships and social networks; 5) educational attainment; 6) spiritual fulfillment; 7) citizenship; and 8) social responsibility. The third domain, personal fulfillment, contains three outcomes: 1) happiness; 2) satisfaction; and 3) a sense of general well-being (Halpern, 1994). The transition movement required a specific definition of quality of life, not simply and inferred and non-specific one that the first two movements had. In terms of understanding quality of life in transition, this specific definition was created to include all aspects of life. Most of the research previous to this had directly associated quality of life with having a job which simply is not accurate or comprehensive. A person can have a job, but still have a low quality of life; and, to invert this, a person can have great quality of life and no job at all. Halpern’s concept of quality of life lends itself to a more detailed understanding of the transition experience and his community adjustment model.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is important because the information will be used to better the RiverPass program as a whole. The study also furthered general education, transition education, disability studies, other transition programs, society, and the participants themselves through having their voices and stories heard. The data gathered will help to lend insight and understanding into what
aspects of the program are effective and perhaps what needs to be changed. The study revealed what attributes the students lend to having an effect on them and how the process occurred. This study also provided a model and information on how to succeed in the context of the transition process. This could be duplicated and used in the future to replicate the RiverPass experience. This has importance because the data could be used elsewhere in the world to help students reach their goals. The overarching purpose of my study was to understand the post school outcomes of graduates of a specialized transition program. Along with demographic factors such as race, gender, rurality, job status, and disability, this study addressed the following IDEA post-school outcomes: gainful employment, independent living, and social realm interaction, and seek to understand the relationships between these factors. This is significant because clearly RiverPass is a more effective transition program than most others in the country and in the region with regards to its employment rate after graduation being over eighty percent (Mutua, 2015). The program’s philosophy and implementation has addressed and fulfilled the five main goals as defined by IDEA and could potentially be replicated and looked at as a model program from other similar programs trying to achieve similar results.

**Scope of the Study**

In this study, I conducted in depth interviews of graduates of the RiverPass program to determine the extent to which they attribute their post-school outcomes to the transition preparation they received in the program. Follow-up interviews were conducted with particular participants based upon their responses to the initial in-depth interview. In selecting the participants, I used purposive sampling focusing on specific factors, attributes, and variables to determine who receives simple or in-depth interviews. Some of these factors included gender, race, disability, job status, and rural vs. urban home location. Parameters and descriptors of the
study included these attributes. The study took place at a flagship public university in the southeastern United States which is a fully accredited institution. The participants were adults with intellectual disabilities who have graduated from the RiverPass program. These participants are all transition program graduates from years past with the majority age between 21 and 35.

**Definition of Terms**

Accommodation: Altering processes and physical spaces to make them accessible to individuals with disabilities.

Adult Services: Programs that work with and for adults with a variety needs.

Americans with Disabilities Act: Legislation that prohibits discrimination based upon disability status.

Age of Majority: The age in which people are able to decide for themselves what they want and need. This is usually 18.

Aptitude: The interests, strengths, weaknesses, skills, and information that a person possesses. This is often related to academics or occupations.

Backward Planning: The process of planning from the end goal first and working backwards while addressing support needs at each level.

Career Planning: The overall process of planning occupational and societal goals. An example of this is transition planning.

Case Manager: An individual whose job it is to obtain and coordinate services for a person with disabilities. An example of a case manager is a transition coordinator.

Course of Study: This is the educational program that a student takes part in. Examples of this include vocational, college prep, and apprenticeship.

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Criterion of Ultimate Function: These are the skills needed for individuals with disabilities to function in occupational, social, and residential realms.

Customized Employment: Customization and adaptation of employment. This is performed to benefit both the employer and employee. It is based upon the skills, interests, and needs of the disabled individual coupled with the overall occupational needs of the employer. This can include: job carving, self-employment, home-employment, restructuring, and other adaptations of the job and job environment. According to the Federal Register of June 26, 2002, customized employment included reasonable accommodation and support for an individual to perform the job task that has been negotiated and developed. This varies on a case by case basis.

Developmental Disability: A disability that is acquired from at birth until the age of 21. This significantly effects self-care and hygiene, mobility, learning, self-direction, speech, and the prospect of independent living.

Education of All Handicapped Children Act: 1975 legislation that mandated education for all disabled students. Also introduced the following terms: IEP, least restrictive environment, free appropriate public education, and multifactored evaluation.

Eligibility: Set of rules that determines whether or not students or families are qualified for services based on disability, income, or other variables.

Employability Life-Skills Assessment: A checklist that is used yearly to assess a student’s level of performance in 24 employability skills areas in the areas of personal, social, and daily living habits.

Employment Specialist: A person who provides job placement, training, and follow services to a worker that has a disability. Sometimes uses in place of job coach.
Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): This is the requirement, introduced by the EHA of 1975, that schools provide an education relevant to the needs of students with disabilities. The courts have generally stated that appropriateness does not mean optimal, only that the student is able to progress at a reasonable rate.

Functional Vocational Evaluation: An evaluation that focuses on identifying skills demonstrated by the student in actual vocational and life activities. Situational and work assessments are functional. IQ tests and standardized reading level tests are not.

Group Action Planning: A self-determination approach that helps students take charge of personal futures planning.

Guardian: A person or agency that assumes limited or unlimited authority to make decisions for a minor or an adult who has been determined to be incompetent in a court of law. Included are medical guardianship, guardianship of the person, and guardian of the estate.

Higher Education Act Amendments of 2008: The Higher Education Act provides support and resources for equal access and accommodations for students with disabilities in postsecondary education.

Inclusion: The process of including students with disabilities in the environments, activities, and curriculum of typical students and persons. Inclusion may mean different things to different people. It is sometimes used interchangeably with the term integration.

Individualized Education Program: A statement of the programs and services that will be provided to a student with a disability that is eligible under the IDEA.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): An updated version of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) that required the statement of needed transition services as part of the IEP in 1990.
Integration: In the disability context, the process of including persons with disabilities in the environments, activities, and social networks of typical persons. It is sometimes used interchangeably with the term *inclusion*.

Intellectual Disability: The term that has replaced mental retardation, as provided by the American Association for Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.

Job Analysis: The process of analyzing a job in terms of essential elements, skills needed, and characteristics to aid in job matching and training.

Job Carving: A technique used in advanced supported employment programs where a job is divided into components that can be done by a person with a severe disability.

Job Trainer: In supported employment, generally a paraprofessional who provides on-site job training and supports to a worker with a disability. It is sometimes used interchangeably with employment specialist or job coach.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): A concept introduced to education by the EHA in 1975 that required a continuum of searches for students with disabilities so that they could be educated in as integrated an environment as possible, while still providing FAPE.

Life-Centered Career Education: This career development approach delineates 22 major competencies that can be infused into primary, middle, and secondary curricula to address the major life domains of work, home, and academics.

Lifestyle Planning: A form of person-centered planning that describes future goals and defines the steps needed to reach them.

Natural Supports: Persons, practices, and things that naturally occur in the environment that are used to meet the support needs of an individual.
Postsecondary Education: Educational programs that follow high school, including colleges, universities, technical and vocational schools, and community colleges.

Referral: The process of notifying an agency to request services. A referral is often followed by an eligibility determination.

Rehabilitation Services Administration: The agency that oversees the provision of vocational rehabilitation services.

Self-Advocacy: The ability and opportunity for students to make decisions for themselves.

Supported Employment: A form of employment where training is done at the job site and ongoing supports are provided to maintain employment. Supported employment is meant for persons with the most severe disabilities. Supported employment jobs are in integrated settings and may consist of individual placements, mobile work crews, or enclaves.

Supports: Accommodations, persons in the environment, or practices that help an individual in conducting life activities, including employment.

Technology: Machines, services, and adaptations that allow the individual to better control his or her environment.

Transition: The process of moving from adolescence to adult roles during which the child reconciles his or her needs, interests, and preferences with adult norms and roles.

Transition Coordinator: A person or agency responsible for assuring that planned transition services are provided in a timely manner and in a way that complements other services provided to a student.
Transition Meeting: The meeting in which transition is discussed. This meeting should occur no later than age 14 to discuss the student’s course of study and no later than 16 to discuss services and supports needed to achieve the student’s desired outcomes.

Transition Plan: Also known as the Statement of Needed Transition Services or Individual Transition Plant (ITP). The IEP/transition plan states in the IEP what services, supports, and activities will be provided to students to help them reach their career goals.

Transition Planning Inventory: An inventory approach that focuses on student skill and support needs in the areas of; employment, further education, daily living, leisure activities, community participation, health, self-determination, communication, and interpersonal relationships.

Transition Planning: The process of helping students and their families plan services to help them reach career goals and adult living objectives related to their needs, interests, and preferences. The IDEA requires transition-planning activities documented in the IEP for students aged 16 and older.

Vocational Rehabilitation Services: A federal and state program that provides a range of services to persons with disabilities, typically to achieve a particular career goal.

Self-Determination: The ability and opportunity for students to make decisions for themselves.

Social Constructivism: An approach to cognitive development in which knowledge is seen as acquired and developed through social processes.

Social learning theory (Albert Bandura): This posits that learning is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context and can occur purely through observation or direct instruction, even in the absence of motor reproduction or direct reinforcement.
Zone of proximal development (ZPD): The region of sensitivity for learning characterized by the difference between the developmental level of which a child is capable of reaching with the aid of a more skilled partner.

**Summary**

This chapter was intended to provide a brief introduction to the project was interested in doing. Transition education is emerging as a prevalent option for students with intellectual disabilities and can provide information and skills to help them achieve more than previously expected historically. The areas of employment, independent living, and social life are all focused on by both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model. The RiverPass program has been successful in implementing program goals to help students realize and move toward more options than they previously had in their lives. The program graduates’ attributions to RiverPass are what I am interested in studying.
CHAPTER II:
LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will focus on five elements pertinent to the understanding and lending insight into the topic of transition education. Each of these is necessary for an in-depth understanding of transition experience as defined by IDEA 2004 in relation to post-school outcomes and the RiverPass program. More specifically, this literature review focuses on the history and evolution of transition education, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2), Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model, and transition in the southeastern United States of America.

History and Evolution of Transition Education

Transition education as we know it today has its roots in rehabilitation services. Rehabilitation services emerged from the advances in medicine and technology during World War I and the need to treat the masses of casualties returning to the USA. The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 provided government support for disabled veterans and was followed by the Smith-Sears Act of 1918, which provided the first employment services, vocational education training, and the earliest forms of disability assistive technology. In 1920, the Smith-Fess Act built on the previous legislation to include services to civilian government workers who had become disabled. Laws put into place between World War I and World War II dealt mostly with disability in the context of wounded soldiers and the support they required. This was viewed as patriotic and positive for the overall good of the country. Military servicemen had sacrificed much for their country and the public had an overall grateful view toward returning soldiers.
The 1943 Barden-LaFollette Act extended rehabilitation services to include medical services and was significant because it was the first legislation to serve civilians who were not government workers or in the military. All legislation preceding this was specific to military only.

In 1950, the first legal challenge to the rehabilitation services establishment occurred. The National Association for Retarded Citizens (ARC), which was formed by concerned parents of children with special needs, started to advocate for programs that developed skills for those with disabilities. This organization is now known as the Arc of the United States. Programs were created which served children not welcome in the schools of the era. Adult centers for employment and activities were also created to serve the older population of those with disabilities. These family and grassroots efforts started gaining national attention and giving individuals with disabilities a more visual presence in society and policy making. No longer were individuals with disabilities forced to live lives at home and in the shadows for the entirety of their lives.

The 1960s marked an important step in the history of disability. This era created the first federal policy to assist in the lives of individuals with disabilities in terms of goals and desires. While John F. Kennedy was president, he created the President’s Panel on Mental Retardation. This was a very important event because it established research centers for studying intellectual disabilities with regards to causes and possible prevention. This panel also pushed for the improved welfare of all people and especially those with significant needs. Kennedy’s panel was responsible for improved educational programs and making sure they were available to all people, regardless of disability status. This expanded the definition of education to extend beyond classic subjects such as English, mathematics, history, and science. This set the precedent for modern alternate curriculums such as life skills and independent living skills. At
this time, the first jobs and training were also created to officially assist the workforce in helping individuals with disabilities. A continuum was also established during this period to identify and to help all levels of need from mild to severe.

The Vocational Education Act of 1963 created developmental programs for disadvantaged populations and for students with intellectual disabilities. The 1968 Vocational Education Act amendments earmarked 10% of vocational education funds to students with disabilities and established new programs for training rehabilitation service providers. This Act led to the creation of the first work-study programs that provided job experience and training, functional academics, and independent living skills for individuals with intellectual disabilities. This vocational legislation was the beginning of informal transition education, which would later become official education protocol. The 1960s also saw the expansion of legislation to benefit those with developmental disabilities as well as mental health issues.

The Mental Retardation and Facilities and Construction Act of 1963 created the first federal priority to meet the needs of those with intellectual disabilities on a nationally mandated level. This created a framework and scaled program which defined levels of need and how to appropriately deliver adequate and appropriate services to meet the respective levels of need on a case by case basis. This was the first time in which a comprehensive system of services was formed. The general goal of the programs of the 1960s was to integrate academic, social, and vocational curriculums that when coupled with work experience, was supposed to prepare the student for community adjustment and post-school adult life. Unfortunately, the 1970s saw the demise of most of these groundbreaking programs due to funding cuts.

The Arc expanded its role as advocates to include the political realm in the 1970s. Entering the law and policy arena, the Arc began shaping disability politics at this time. Students
with severe disabilities were consistently excluded from public schools until the Pennsylvania division of The Association of Retarded Citizens filed a class action lawsuit. This suit called for public education for all children regardless of disability status or severity. After winning the lawsuit, the Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Citizens helped create the All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. This act is significant because it effectively ended and made illegal the exclusion of children with disabilities from public education. For the first time in history, every single child had the right to some form of education regardless of disability and severity thereof. The 1976 Vocational Education Act amendments emphasized access to regular education and development of new programs for students with special needs. This set precedent for what we now know as inclusive education. It also funded support services for students with special needs.

The 1980s saw a push for coordinating services across both secondary and postsecondary educational systems. There was an increase during this time period in legislation dealing with interagency collaboration and a push for a more comprehensive view of the education plan for students with disabilities. The 1982 Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) provided funds for job training programs, which expanded the occupational possibilities of students with disabilities. The 1983 Education of All Handicapped Children Act amendments provided grant funding to demonstrate coordination between educators and adult services in order to foster transition in post-school settings. In 1984, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act set aside financial assets to facilitate equal access to a range of vocational education activities through supplemental services; this included vocational education in Individualized Education Programs.

The 1990s saw a significant push in the realm of mental disability from charity to individuals with disabilities having guaranteed rights by law. This era is responsible for the
creation of transition as a sub field of special education. The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) required transition plans be in place by the age of 16. The 1990 Carl D. Perkins Act amendments focused on integrating vocational and academic training into one setting instead of having them addressed so separately, as they had been in the past. This integration is generally how transition education is viewed today. The 1994 School-to-Work Opportunity Act provided for state education laws which prepared students for a career. The 1998 Workforce Investment Act was significant because it consolidated 45 previously federally funded job training programs into one manageable and transparent program.

**The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 was the first legislation that established federal guidelines for transition in education. This original incarnation of IDEA would see many revisions over the years and would continue to evolve transition education policy and law. The most current is the IDEA of 2004, which guides special education policy today. The IDEA of 1990 federally required transition services be included as a part of each student’s IEP and laid out the right for students with disabilities to be legally assisted while transitioning into and occupying adult life. Previous legislation was driven by pity for the special needs population with no real expectation of adult competence in social life or the workplace. The IDEA of 1990 gave persons with special needs guaranteed rights to assistance. Part of the IDEA of 1990 legislation required all public school systems develop official documents containing needed transition assistance and services to be conjoined with the student’s IEP before the age of 16. From then on, students with IEPs were mandated to have a full transition plan in place which provided a blueprint to their post-school lives and goals. The
definition of transition generally used in the education field is the one defined in IDEA. The legislation defines transition as

> a coordinated set of activities for a student with a disability that were designed within an outcome-oriented process that would promote movement from school to postschool activities. Included in this are the following: postsecondary education, vocational training, integrated employment that includes support where needed, continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, and community access and participation. (Flexer, Baer, Luft, & Simmons, 2013, p. 12)

The IDEA is still viewed as the predominant definition and source for transition policy and practice. The IDEA of 1997 saw the work done for the IDEA of 1990 expanded to further include transition research showed a significant disconnect between transition services and students’ educational curriculums (Kohler, 1998). This was acted upon in the IDEA of 1997 with an approach that attempted to view the academic and transition curriculums as one. This took place in the form of an amendment which required the educational team of each student to produce a statement of needed transition services as well as a statement of transition needs by the age of 14. This change mandated future planning into adulthood and added academic curriculum accountability to the transition planning process. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the IDEA of 1997 was the focus on self-determination.

Previously, most of the decision making of the transition planning process was made by educators, family, and the transition team. The new focus on self-determination turned the decision-making focus to the student and family and mandated families prepare themselves to relinquish overall control of IEP and transition planning to the student before the age of 17. The IDEA of 1997 is prominently seen as strengthening the bond and establishing closer collaboration between general education and special education practitioners. It also established the importance of basing the transition plan on the interests and overall needs of the student as
opposed to making decisions on the student’s behalf based on perceived needs and opinions of educators and family.

The IDEA of 2004 was the third reenactment of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to take form place. This third effort enhanced the transition specific curriculum by specifying a prescriptive coursework list of activities for students. This list was to be results oriented and took precedent over the previous outcome oriented approach. This was significant because it took the stance that results are the most important indicator of progress and the process may differ from student to student. If the transition plan was not creating acceptable results, it needed to be changed to provide better results for the student. This results-oriented view is probably the largest contributor of the IDEA of 2004. The 2004 version of IDEA also changed the mandated minimum age of transition planning to the previous minimum age of 16 and was drafted in hopes of creating more accountability from educators to their students’ transition plans. This accountability standard was increased by two prominent additions to the IDEA legislation of previous years. According to the 2004 IDEA, these additions were (1) postsecondary goals that are based upon age relevant assessments that relate to employment, independent living skills, and education, and (2) transition services that are required to reach relevant goals (IDEA, 2004). In addition, the 2004 version included (1) vocational education in possible needed transition services; (2) the interests, strengths and weaknesses of the student to be included in the transition planning process; (3) the overarching purpose of special education expanded to encompass life preparation and preparation for postsecondary education; and (4) a performance report to be produced when a student exited their K-12 education (Flexer, Baer, Luft, & Simmons, 2013).
The IDEA of 2004 introduced some new performance indicator terminology as well. Indicator 13 and Indicator 14 are the most well known in transition community as they are the indices related to transition education. Indicator 13 was created by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) with the purpose of setting and reporting on postsecondary goals to the federal government. The legislation discusses the importance of postsecondary goals and how they are to be updated yearly to include progress made towards these goals. Each year the student must complete a transition assessment and have a meeting with the IEP team which addresses what services will be employed to allow the student to realize his or her postsecondary goals (IDEA, 2004).

The National Secondary Training and Technical Assistance Center was charged with creating a checklist that allowed states to measure and report on the progress of their transition plans and simplify the submission and reporting process. The checklist included items such as courses of study, post-school goals in relation to made progress, progress and assistance of transition services, and communication among the transition team. Indicator 14 was created in order to monitor the overall quality of transition plans and document post-school outcomes of students with disabilities. Indicator 14 included students who either are competitively employed, have been enrolled in postsecondary education, or both of these. As I will discuss later, these are two of the most significant post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. The federal entity tasked with coordinating and collecting Indicator 14 data is the National Postschool Outcomes Center (NPSO). The NPSO defines competitive employment as working for a wage equal to or more than minimum wage in a setting with nondisabled coworkers for more than 20 hours a week and for more than 90 days the same year the student leaves high school (Aud et al., 2011). They define enrollment in higher education as full-time or part-time enrollment in a two-
year program or four-year and above program for at a minimum one semester in the same year as exiting high school (Aud et al., 2011).

The evolution of IDEA from 1997 to 2004 undoubtedly moved towards a results-oriented approach. This helped somewhat standardize the transition process and how to go about it. Throughout these changes, student inclusion and participation have emerged as important themes in the education and transition of students with intellectual disabilities. Overall, the move to results-oriented academics, some argue, has led to improved opportunities, improved expectations, better instruction methods, higher quality teaching, and better post-school outcomes (deFur, 2002). The four essential elements of transition services introduced in the IDEA of 1990 and developed further in 1997 and 2004 continue to form the basis of the transition process and transition education policy. These elements of the transition planning process: (1) student need, interests, preferences, strengths, weaknesses; (2) outcome-oriented and results-oriented process; (3) coordinated set of activities across all student environments; and (4) designed to promote student movement into post-school activities, all come together to form the transition experience. This is something I seek to understand throughout this project and is my overarching goal.

The IDEA of 1990 set the foundations of transition legislation in education. It established the four elements of transition which should always be considered during the planning process and mandated 16 as the age in which transition plans must be in place. The IDEA of 1997 added the caveat that the transition planning process must include the student’s course of study and reduced the transition plan age to 14. It also mandated students take part in testing in order to include their participation with their same age peers in school. This was the beginning of the push for accountability in transition education. The IDEA of 2004 pushed hard
for results-oriented transition planning and implementation. Transition services at this time were pushed into the functional academic realm more than they had been in the past years. The 2004 version of IDEA also led the way for students with disabilities to reach for college level education and the supports needed to do so.

The IDEA of 1997 and the IDEA of 2004 can be compared through their differing views of the definition of transition, transition statement, and the IEP process and documentation. These changes are evident when comparing the two pieces of legislation and the verbiage used in each. The IDEA of 1997 has a three-part definition of transition services as

a coordinated set of activities for a student with a disability that, “(A) is designed within an outcome-oriented process that promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation; (B) is based on the individual student’s needs, taking into account the student’s preferences and interests; (C) includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school objectives, and, when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation (section 602). (IDEA, 1997, p. 118)

This differs in the 2004 version of IDEA because although part C is identical, parts A and B differ from the 1997. Regarding the definition of transition services, the IDEA of 2004 states in part A

is designed to be within a results-oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child’s movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment) continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation. (IDEA, 2004, p. 118)

Part B simply changes the word student to the word child in the definition section. The transition statement and the IEP sections of the 1997 and 2004 versions also have changes which occurred in the years between the two drafts. The transition statement and IEP section of the IDEA of 1997 have a three-part section which states the following:
(vii) (I) beginning at age 14, and updated annually, a statement of the transition services needs of the child…. that focuses on the child’s courses of study (such as participation in advanced-placement courses or a vocational education program); (II) beginning at age 16 (or younger, if determined appropriate by the IEP Team), a statement of needed transition services for the child, including, when appropriate, a statement of the interagency responsibilities or any needed linkages; and (III) beginning at least one year before the child reaches the age of majority under State Law, a statement that the child has been informed of his or her rights under this title that will transfer to the child on reaching the age of majority under 615(m) (Section 614(d)). (IDEA, 1997, p.118)

This definition significantly evolved until the 2004 version of the same sections that state

(VIII) beginning not later than the first IEP to be in effect when the child is 16, and updated annually thereafter, (aa) appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills; (bb) the transition services (including courses of study) needed to assist the child in reaching those goals; and (III) beginning at least one year before the child reaches the age of majority under State Law, a statement that the child has been informed of his or her rights under this title that will transfer to the child…. on reaching the age of the majority under 615(m) (Section 614(d)). (IDEA, 2007) (Flexer, Baer, Luft & Simmons, 2013, p. 45)

The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2

The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) is the most in depth and comprehensive study in the field of transition. The study was a federally funded project and has been the largest single source of data on transition outcomes and transition education in the United States of America. It was conducted on behalf of the government by SRI International, formerly known as The Stanford Research Institute. The study took place over a ten-year time span and included an astounding 11,000 secondary students with disabilities. Five waves of data collection took place with each being two years apart from one another. Phone interviews, mailed surveys, direct assessment, and academic records were all used to record responses from students, parents, and school staff. The NLTS-2 was responsible for tracking and documenting the education and transitional experiences of students aged 13-16 in the year 2000 while they transitioned from students into adults. The final data collection took place in 2009 when the
students participating in the study were between 21 and 25 years of age. Data was gathered regarding postsecondary education, independent living, employment, and social interaction. As the data became available, the government and other institutions released data briefs and reports highlighting the findings. The study results were organized into multiple data briefs, although they all used the same data set and were part of the same study. The reports span a variety of different aspects. For organizational purposes, I will address each data brief individually.

The original NLTS, also known as NLTS-1, was funded by the government between 1987 and 1993 and will be used to compare data with the more recent NLTS-2. For each participating NLTS-2 student, an educator with a relationship to the specific student was also asked to participate. This school employee was asked to complete a series of three surveys to help document the situation. The first was a school program survey which provided information on the student’s school, educational program, special education courses, educational performance, and vocational courses. The general education teacher survey was collected in order to gather information from the teacher regarding the student performance in each class in terms of participation and overall progress in general education courses. The school characteristics survey was designed to gather information about the student body, school policy, and overall academic and financial resources of the specific school they work in. The student would take assessments designed to measure core academic skill levels and knowledge in areas such as vocabulary, reading comprehension, math, science, social studies, self-conception, and self-determination. They would also partake in an interview. High school transcript data was also collected in order to record what courses the student took and how they performed in each course. The timeline for the NLTS-2 data collection included a parent interview every other year, a student interview every other year, a direct assessment on the second and fourth years of
participation, a teacher survey on the second and fourth years of participation, a school program survey on the second and fourth years of participation, a school characteristics survey on the second and fourth years of participation, an academic transcript every other year, and data analysis every year (NLTS-2, 2002).

According to the NLTS-2 data, 13% of all youth between the ages of 13 and 16 receive some form of special education during the 2000-2001 school year. Sixty-two percent of these special education students were diagnosed with some form of learning disability. A diagnosis of mental retardation comprised 12% of the special education population while students with emotional disturbance occupied 11% of the special education student population. More than 55% of special education students were reported as having more than one type of disability including mental, emotional, health, speech and language disabilities. The age of interview participants for NLTS-2 ranged from 13 through 17 with the average being 15.2 years old. Youth with speech disabilities were younger than the average at 14.9 years of age and students with visual disabilities or multiple disabilities were slightly above the average age at 15.4 years old. The gender gap between participants was significant with 67% being male. NLTS-2 cited multiple studies (Hebbeler et al., 2001; Wagner et al., 2002) with similar results of having a majority of students with disabilities being male. NLTS-2 found 85% of students with autism were male. The rate of males among students with hearing or visual disabilities was similar to the rate of the general population. Race also played a role in the percentage of students with disabilities with African Americans occupying 21% compared to 16% of the general population. Hispanic students were fewer among students with disabilities than their nondisabled peers at 14% compared to 16% of the general population. White youth occupied a similar percentage in both disabled and nondisabled populations at 62% and 63% for each group. Most racial groups
were similar overall to the general population, but African Americans were a higher percentage of those with mental retardation at 33% and a smaller portion of those with other health disabilities at 13%. Very few Hispanics had other health disabilities at 8% (NLTS-2, 2003).

The social activities and relationships of participants in the study help lend insight into their support structure and quality of life. This particular aspect is changing significantly in modern times with the progression of technology and social media. Thirty-one percent of youth in the study reported they see friends more than four times per week outside of school, while 9% reported that they never see friends outside of school. Sixty-five percent indicated they rarely or never receive phone calls from friends compared to the 25% that did. The percentage of students invited to other students’ social activities during the past year was 85%, which is probably increasing due to the commonality of digital phones, text messaging, and social media. Sixty-five percent of respondents participated in group activities during the past year with 46% being at school and 49% being in the community in which they live. In comparison, the National Survey of American Families data indicates these numbers have been similar since 1987. No significant age-related differences exist in terms of social activities for participants. Boys were more likely than girls to see friends often at 34% compared to 23% and slightly more likely to receive phone calls from peers at 27% compared to 21% for girls. Both male and female groups were equally likely to participate in organized extracurricular activities, but males were more likely to spend that time involved in some type of sport. Girls were more likely to spend time involved in a religious group at 57% compared to boy’s 45%. Girls were also more than twice as likely to belong to a performing group at 27% compared to males only being involved with a performance group 13% of the time (NLTS-2, 2004).
Employment is one of the hallmark features of transition plans and programs for many students exiting K-12 education. It is often viewed as the most important post-school transition outcome. The Youth Employment Data of NLTS-2 expands upon this in many ways. The original NLTS (NLTS-1) gathered data from 1987 until 1990 to investigate how students with disabilities were employed and at what rate this was occurring. The NLTS-2 researchers gathered data via telephone interviews, as well as mail surveys, from parents and guardians of students with disabilities in 2001 to compare with the NLTS-1 data gathered more than 10 years prior. The data showed almost 60% of students with disabilities were employed during a one-year period mostly at jobs not related to school. A small portion of the jobs were school related in circumstances such as work-studies. These work-study jobs were part-time occupations working for or through the school. The students would receive school credit, monetary compensation, or both for their time and effort. Fifteen percent of students had a form of work-study during the year. This represented a 6% increase since NLTS-1 and was significant for students with mental retardation, emotional disturbances, or students with multiple types of disability. Work-study placements occurred at food service locations 19% of the time, maintenance occupations 16% of the time, and clerical positions 15% of the time. Over 90% of students received school credit and/or financial compensation. Forty-eight percent received school credit, 28% received both pay and school credit, and 15% received only pay. The older the student was, the higher the likelihood they were involved with a work-study program. This increased with age, as those 15 years old or younger were employed with a work-study only 10% of the time. Sixteen year olds were employed 15% of the time and 17 year olds were employed at a 19% rate at work-studies.
The disability category for each student directly related to the likelihood of the student having a work-study. Students with speech and learning disabilities were the least likely to have work-study jobs at only 7% and 10%. Comparatively, 30% of youth with mental retardation, autism, or multiple disabilities had work-study jobs during the year. Regular non-work-study jobs were more common among youth with disabilities. Fifty-four percent of students were employed in regular jobs within the year. This can be compared to the 50% of their general population peers having jobs. Between 1987 and 1998 the percentage of students with jobs increased by 9%. Summer employment rates were slightly different than school year rates. One-third of students worked during the school year and the summer. Fifteen percent worked during the summer only and 4% worked during the school year only. At any random point during the year, there were approximately 22% of students employed. As far as regular jobs, the most common type was maintenance at 24%. Personal care job types were the second most common at 19% and food service jobs were the third most common at 16%. Trade jobs occupied 8% of regular jobs for students with disabilities with retail and clerical being the least common each with 6%. The hours between jobs and job types varied depending on the season and semester. 20% of youth worked more than 16 hours per week during the school year and 50% worked for 8 hours or less. During the summer, these numbers increased to over 16 hours per week for about half of the students. The earned wage generally fell in between $4.50 and $6.50 for most students. Twenty-five percent made $6.50 or more per hour, 16% made less than $4.50 per hour, 23% made $5.50 to $6.49 per hour, and 36% made $4.50 to $5.49 per hour.

The relationship between age, pay, and employment type was the same at the student’s nondisabled peers with hours and pay increasing as the age increased. Job type also changed with age. The employment rate varied depending on disability. Students with learning
disabilities, emotional disturbances, or speech impairments were the most likely to be employed during the year at 50%-60%. This statistic equaled or surpassed their nondisabled peers. The overall increases in employment from 1987 to 2001, depending on disability, range from 4% to 17%. Youth with learning, speech, or health disability increased anywhere from 10% to 17% between NLTS-1 and NLTS-2 data. The gender of the student in relation to employment rate is similar to the general population, which is about equal (Rothstein & Herz, 2000). The gender gap has narrowed since 1987, with females climbing 12% to within about 5% of male employment rates. Race is correlated with the likelihood of being employed for students with disabilities and the general population (Gardecki, 2001). Employment rates for white students were the highest at 62%, with rates for African American students at 42% and Hispanic students at 36% (NLTS-2, 2003).

The transition planning process has significant effects on the post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. A large part of this process is identifying realistic goals for the student once they finish their K-12 education. These goals can include employment, independent living, continuing education, training, social involvement, community citizenship, and family life just to name a few. The NLTS-2 data shows 45% of students with disabilities seek some type of college experience in their future. About half of students had employment as their primary transition goal after they leave high school. 8.2% of students have plans for a supported employment role, while 4.8% have plans for a sheltered employment workshop of some sort. On the other hand, about half of students had independent living as their primary post-school goal. The active participants in the planning process have a large impact on transition goals and the implementation of said goals. Eighty-five percent of parents are involved in the transition
planning process. It is alarming to me this number is not higher. The importance of family being involved is something which cannot be looked over.

There are negative impacts associated with situations of parents not invested in their children’s IEP and transition planning. Students almost always participate in their transition planning; however, they do so at varying levels. About 70% of students take an active role by either by leading their own transition process or by making their opinions and inputs known at meetings. These occur at 12% or 58% respectively. The school employees take part in the transition planning process in varying degrees. Roughly 60% of students have a teacher involved in their planning who is not specific to special education. This occurs far more often for students with either two or four-year college plans than special needs students with no college plans in their future. The difference is 67% for students with college plans as opposed to only 49% for students without college plans. Perhaps this is due to the need for more advanced core subject work in post-school settings. About 43% of special education students take some type of general education vocational classes during the semester (Cameto & Wagner, 2003). School administrators and counselors also serve on transition planning teams at rates of 56% and 61% each. The likelihood of administrators taking part increases with student age.

Transition services workers are unfortunately less likely to be involved in the transition planning process than school employees. Fortunately, the percentage of students who have transition services personnel involved in their planning process goes up when the student has employment as one of their post-school goals. This is crucial during the transition process due to the changing of personnel supports after K-12 education. I have experienced first-hand how difficult it can be to get everyone on the same page when a student leaves high school and transitions into local adult agency service eligibility. The relationship between the schools and
community service providers needs to be a good one and this isn’t always the case. The student suffers greatly when communication between the two parties does not take place. 43% of students who list supported employment in their post-school goals have service personnel involved in their planning process. Unfortunately, this number drops all the way to 16% for students who do not have employment as a goal. This is a giant disadvantage in terms of quality of life and odds of post-school success in the community.

According to staff surveys, vocational rehab counselors were the most common non-school, non-student, and non-family participant in the transition planning process. Students who did not have employment or independent living goals were twice as unlikely to have a vocational rehab counselor in their planning process than those who did. Students with independent living goals or employment goals had a vocational rehabilitation counselor participate in their transition planning process 28% of the time compared to only 14% of the time for those without such goals. This also increased with age, as 1 in 10 students age 16 or younger had a rehab counselor, while students older than 17 had counselors at a rate of 1 per every 4 students. Regarding post-school services, the data indicated there were two dominant types; educational support services and employment support services. About half of students had postsecondary educational support needs depending on the level of support they required. 38% of students expressed a need for occupational support in the form of either job training, job placement assistance, or job support after high school. About 5% indicated a need to other supports such as mental health, transportation, behavioral, and living supports. Once again, the older the student, the more common these requests were. It was evident in the data the students who knew before leaving high school they wanted to continue their education, have some type of employment, or live
independently had a significant advantage in obtaining the correct support services than those
who did not know what they wanted to do after high school.

Deciding before graduating gave the transition planning team a chance to contact and
align the correct supports needed for potential success in reaching the student’s goals. The
current educational best practices literature in transition suggests communication and
relationships between schools, rehabilitation services, and other community agencies has a direct
impact on the transition process for young adults (National Center on Secondary Education and
Transition, 2004). These linkages are crucial for a successful transition process and without
them, a seamless transition experience becomes almost impossible. Parents do not always know
about the appropriate services available to their children after leaving the K-12 education system.
Parents of about one third of special needs students age 15 are given adult services information
about future available support each year. Thankfully, this increases to include about 75% of
parents by the time their children are 17 or 18 years of age. The well-informed parent is in a
better place to make decisions than the ignorant one (NLTS-2, 2005).

One factor fundamental to a student’s transition into adulthood is the level of
involvement of the parents or legal guardian. Having experienced both the good and the bad of
parental involvement, I can attest to the fact a student’s outcome in life is significantly affected
by the support and decision making of the parents. There is a plethora of evidence families play
a large part in the education of their children (Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Berla, 1994;
Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2003). This family support is especially important for
students with intellectual disabilities. The level of parental involvement was a somewhat under-
researched subject with regards to the transition process until NLTS-2 data came out. Eighty-
two percent of families reported being involved with their children’s school life. Seventy-five
percent of these families also reported helping their children with school assigned work on a minimum weekly basis. About 20% of parents reported helping with their children’s work almost every school day.

Special needs students are more likely to receive homework help than their general education counterparts. The NLTS-2 found this occurred five times as often for special education students compared to nondisabled peers. Students with disabilities, whether receiving help rarely or often, were twice as likely to be offered assistance overall compared to the general population. Not all special education students needed or wanted help, but it appears help was usually available if needed, per the data. The level of family involvement with school work was often dependent on the type of disability. Students with emotional disturbances were the least likely to receive homework assistance from family members or legal guardians. Autistic students and students with multiple disabilities received the most help with school assignments, as they were helped five or more times per week between 31% and 36% of the time. Students with learning disabilities were helped five or more times per week only on a 20% basis. The families of students with disabilities participated in school related activities at a rate of 93% overall. School-related activities varied greatly from school sports, chaperoning, science fairs, musical performances, serving on committees, etc. Three out of every four or about 77% of parents indicated they attended school meetings and 73% indicated they were present for parent-teacher conferences. Parents reported involvement in school events at a 62% rate and actual volunteer work about one fourth of the time. The parents heavily involved attending or taking part in five or more events a year were accounted for at a 45% rate of the overall parental population that participated in any school events throughout the year. These figures are similar to the parental involvement statistics for general population parents. The exceptions are for
school meetings and conferences where parents of students with disabilities are more involved than the parents of nondisabled students at rates of 77% and 73% for each. The data comes in at 70% and 56% for the general population parents. Parents of children with disabilities want to be and tend to be heavily involved with school functions.

The parental involvement in educational events tended to vary by the category of the disability their child occupied. The highest involvement rating overall was for parents of students with speech disabilities. They were the most likely to attend meetings, class events, and to volunteer. The least likely to be involved with these activities were the parents of students with mental retardation and emotional disturbances. The exception to this was these same parents were actually the most likely to attend the parent-teacher conferences. The IEP planning and meeting process is another important school related aspect for parents to be involved in.

Roughly 88% of parents of students with disabilities indicated they participated in one or more IEP meeting in each school year. Teachers were also asked about their perceptions of parental involvement in the IEP process and the data is consistent with the figures reported by the parents themselves. Basically, the parents were being somewhat honest most of the time whether or not they were involved with their children’s IEP and progress in relation to it. Teachers reported 83% of parents were present at the most recent IEP meeting; this slightly differs from the parent’s reported level of 88%. This difference was generally chalked up to the differing reporting periods between the groups at every year for teachers and every two years for parents. Unfortunately, parents being present at IEP meetings does not necessarily mean they were involved in making decisions. A little over half of parents reported being involved in the actual decision making regarding goals. 34% of parents indicated they wanted to be more involved in the IEP process. The most likely parents to attend IEP meetings were those of students with
brain injury and health disabilities at 96% each. Although parents of students with mental retardation and speech disabilities were the least likely to participate in the IEP meetings, they were still in attendance 85% and 86% of the time respectively.

The family expectations regarding the future of their children can be directly related to the academic involvement and motivation taking place in school and afterwards. Optimistic parents and high goals for their children directly related to more positive achievements for students with disabilities than parents without these attributes (Newman, 2005). The definition of success varies from situation to situation, but most youth’s parents want their children to experience success in whatever they are capable of, whether independent living or continuing education or occupational achievement. Parents indicated at an 85% rate they believed their children would succeed in reaching multiple future goal-oriented milestones. Two prominent milestones repeatedly observed in the data were high school graduation and independent living. Almost all youth are expected to find some type of work, but parents participating in NLTS-2 doubted the jobs their children would obtain could pay for complete autonomy. 83% of parents of children with disabilities believed their children would be able to support themselves, while 97% reported their child would have some type of occupation. 85% of youth were expected to live at home without adult supervision. These categories allow some flexibility in whether or not parents intend to provide financial support for their children.

While parents certainly expected their children to graduate high school, the same could not be said for college graduation expectations. Out of the three in five students expected to attend some type of postsecondary education, about half were expected to actually finish either vocational, trade, or two-year college educational programs. The number drops to about 33% with regards to expectations of graduating from a four-year college. Youth with disabilities have
expectations for continuing education which are significantly lower than the general population, according to their parents. Only 62% of them are expected to attend postsecondary education in some form compared to 92% of their nondisabled peers. Of the 62%, only one third is expected to graduate from four-year institutions compared to 88% for their peers. The type of disability also affects the expectations of success for the student. The highest expectations in postsecondary education according to the data were for speech and auditory disabilities. The lowest educational expectations after high school were for groups with mental retardation, multiple disabilities, and autism. This group also had the lowest expectations for overall independence with learning and speech impaired students having the highest ratings for independence (NLTS-2, 2005).

The differences and changes throughout the years between the NLTS-1 and the NLTS-2 are evident in the data included in each study and the associated data briefs. The transition process changes over time just as society does. When comparing the two studies there are a few particulars which jump out either as changes in effectiveness and policy or perhaps just signs of the changing times. The school dropout rate for students with disabilities decreased by 17% from 1987 through 2003. The school completion rate also increased between the two years to 70% in 2003. As far as living arrangements and the social activities realm of students with disabilities, not much has changed. Both study groups were living with parents about 75% of the time and about one out of every 8 students lived independently. About 90% of participants were single, but some elements of the social realm have changed over the year. Organized community group participation more than doubled between the two groups to 28% of participants being involved in some type of community organized group. Unfortunately, there was a significant increase in the amount of youth who had been disciplined at school, fired from work, or placed
under arrest. This only happened to about one third of the NLTS-1 cohort and happened to more than half of cohort two.

The postsecondary education participation rate between the two groups more than doubled to 32% in group two. The single largest increase with regards to postsecondary category was in two-year colleges, which increased 17% to 21% for 2003. The four-year attendance also saw an increase of 8% bringing the total percentage of youth with disabilities who had been enrolled at a four-year school to 10%. The 2003 group saw an increase to 70% employment from 55% in 1987; however, cohort two was 18% less likely to work full-time. There was a 15% increase in 2003 of students earning above minimum wage, as the percentage increased from 70% to 85%. More group two students worked in retail than group one and less had maintenance and clerical category jobs. The type of disability had a marked effect on how the students have performed over time. This is due to legislation, different understandings of disability, medical advances, educational advances, specialized training, etc. Youth with hearing or visual disabilities saw the highest rates of high school completion at 82% and 94%. Visually impaired youth also had the largest postsecondary education increase and the highest enrollment of any disability group. They also had the largest pay increase. Youth with emotional disturbances saw a 16% increase in school completion rate, but still remained the lowest of any disability group. This group also had a 10% increase in two-year college enrollment. The most significant increase for this group with emotional disturbances was the 33% increase in having been arrested, fired, or disciplined. Almost 90% of this group had experienced one of these, which was the highest of any category. The NLTS-2 data showed the overwhelming negative aspects of dropping out of high school and how this limited future options. Dropouts were enrolled in postsecondary education at rates less than one in ten. Only about 25% of dropouts had attempted
to enroll in a high school completion program. They did not see improvements in job earnings and categories non-dropouts saw between the two cohorts. Dropouts were also less likely than those who graduated to have familial support and more likely overall to have experienced negative behavior consequences.

The gender gap between males and females being employed closed to almost even in 2003 as opposed to males being employed twice as much as females in 1987. Unfortunately, the gender gap closed with negative behavioral consequences to the point where females essentially caught up to males in terms of having been in some form of trouble, when this was not the case in 1987. The 2003 group saw males improving their high school completion rate; girls stayed about the same as group one data asserts. Girls saw a large increase in postsecondary education; mostly in two-year colleges. They did not improve their four-year school attendance numbers like the males did, however. Males from cohort 2 were literally twice as likely as girls to have attended a four-year college at some point. Females did not see the increase in wages males saw in the second group; they were, however, less likely to be single than males were. Race and ethnicity also saw a few changes between the NLTS-1 and NLTS-2 data analysis. The experiences of African Americans and Hispanics with intellectual disabilities have over time grown more and more similar to the experiences of white students. Participation in organized groups, community service organizations, and volunteer activities for Hispanic students increased to similar levels as white individuals and the amount of African American youth with jobs did as well. With this progress also came evidence of some still existing gaps. White youth are still more likely than African Americans to be living independently after high school. Only white students saw a significant increase in postsecondary education; however, African American students saw a large increase in four-year college enrollment. No changes in the
occupational data of Hispanic students was observed between NLTS-1 and NLTS-2 (NLTS-2, 2005).

**Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model**

Throughout the years many transition models have gained popularity, with some having more success than others. In this section, I will discuss some of the more prominent ones. My theoretical framework using Halpern’s model will be discussed in much greater length.

Will’s Bridges Model of transition was created in 1983 by Madeline Will. Her model emphasized linkages or *bridges* between school and post-school life. The basic concept was secondary and postsecondary environments for students with disabilities need to overlap via connections and communications made by services and between supports. Her model attempted to address the issue of inconsistency between services and service providers throughout the transition process. This model was conceptualized as three bridges to employment. The first is transition without special services (postsecondary education). The second is transition with limited services (vocational rehabilitation). The third is transition with ongoing services (supported employment). The main criticism of this model is it was designed only to promote movement to employment settings and lacked many aspects of academic or social needs of the student.

Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model adopted the concept of three pillars of community adjustment. These are employment, residential environments, and social networks. Halpern argued programs needed to address each of these pillars in order to help the quality of life of students with disabilities. He thought transition was much more than a school simply handing a student to the next person or service provider. His model was very influential in the adoption of IDEA 1990. This model was expanded to form the modern post-school outcomes of
the most recent version of IDEA. This will also serve as my theoretical framework, which will be explored in detail in the next section.

Work Preparation models were very popular in the 1980s and were comprised of a job students were placed in before graduating high school. Upon graduating high school, the idea was they would have experience already and be able to complete the job tasks with little assistance. This model placed community agencies would provide support and case management upon graduation of high school.

The Life Centered Career Education Model identified 22 major competencies which were to be combined into the primary school, middle school, and secondary school curriculums. They were divided into three domains of work, home, and academics (Brolin & Lloyd, 2004). This is similar to another school based model; The Career Development and Transition Education Model, which focused on student skill and support needs around the domains of employment, further education, daily living, leisure activity, community participation, health, self-determination, communication, and interpersonal relationships (Sitlington, Neubart, & Clark, 2010).

Kohler’s transition education model, formed in 1998, used a very broad definition and view of what education actually is. Her view was collaboration was the path to success and saw it as a five-category process in which each must work together. These five processes are student focused planning, student development, interagency collaboration, family involvement, and program structure.

The theoretical framework I have chosen for my project is Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model. This model is directly applicable to the RiverPass program because the program is based upon a variation of Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model. The IDEA of
1990 pulled much terminology and definitions of transition services from Halpern’s model (Johnson & Rusch, 1993). It is undoubtedly one of the most significant and prolific transition models. This framework builds on Madeline Will’s Bridges model which focused primarily on employment as the foundation to the transition experience and adds the residential and interpersonal domains (Halpern, 1985).

Halpern claimed community adjustment would be the foundation to the transition process and three pillars would build upon this foundation. The pillars he proposed were employment, residential environment, and social and interpersonal networks. Halpern’s reconceptualization also emphasized quality of life as an indicator of the success of the transition process. Simply having a job, which was the basis for Will’s model, was not enough to gauge the transition process and quality of life for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Job status, according to Halpern, while important, was just a piece or one third of the transition into adulthood. With community adjustment as the base, employment, residential environment, and social networks acting as pillars, and quality of life as a rubric, Halpern conceptualized the model would be used by many in the field. Students, families, schools and educators continue to use his model today and the RiverPass program operates through a variant of this model. Halpern saw his model connecting the hands of schools and community adult service organizations in an attempt to create or continue a good quality of life for the individual. He saw the community and local social welfare programs as essential to the transition process and saw great value in employment training and postsecondary education opportunities.

The Community Adjustment Model was similar to a career education model and was more than just schools handing off the student (Halpern, 1992). Career education models were introduced by the Career Education Implementation Incentive Act of 1978. The legislation
created a comprehensive model designed to take children all the way to adulthood. Career
education models were systematic, developmental, focused on self-awareness, and oriented to a
wide range of occupations (Flexer, Baer, Luft & Simmons, 2013). These models included all
grades, K-12, and were applied to special needs as well as general education students; they are
also used at RiverPass.

The broad curriculum of career education models was used to develop the Life-Centered
Career Education (LCCE) model. LCCE identified 22 competencies designed to build on each
other and be spread throughout elementary, middle, and high school. This curriculum explored
the major life areas of work, home and academic learning (Brolin & Lloyd, 2004). This is very
closely related to another career education model known as the School-Based Career
Development and Transition Education Model. Focusing on student skill and support, the
School-Based Career Development and Transition Education Model explored the domains of
employment, further education, daily living, leisure activity, community participation, health,
self-determination, communication, and interpersonal relationships (Sitlington, Neubert, &
Clark, 2010). This was also designed as a long-term curriculum for multiple ages and students
with and without disabilities.

Halpern’s work on his transition model has its roots in the policies defined by the Office
of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), by which a model of transition was
created. The OSERS model saw transition as a series of bridges, not totally unlike Will’s model,
but in terms of service needs for special needs students. The primary goal of the OSERS model
was employment and the ideal end results with little regard to anything else in the person’s life.
Halpern saw this as incomplete and incomprehensive and while he admitted that employment
was certainly important, it was only one aspect of life. He introduced his Community
Adjustment Model with employment being one of the three pillars of the model along with social and interpersonal networks and residential environment (Halpern, 1985). These were all part of the overall community adjustment of the individual, which he viewed as the overall goal of transition.

Halpern argued if any one of the pillars failed in his model, the probability of the transition process crashing down was high. The individual’s ability to thrive in the community would then be at risk. The first pillar of employment, per Halpern’s model, included job related aspects such as employment networks, job skills, job searching skills, employers, unemployment and occupational discrimination. His second pillar, encompassing residential environment, included aspects such as living arrangements, home satisfaction, quality, safety, location, recreational opportunities, and community services within close proximity. The third pillar of the social and interpersonal, Halpern argued, was the most important of all three pillars. This pillar includes important aspects of human relationships, communication, feelings, emotions, family support, self-esteem, maturity, intimate relationships, and friendships (Halpern, 1985).

Perhaps the most interesting thing Halpern discovered in his research of this model, however, was success in one or more of the pillars had little effect on success in the others. This went against the OSERS position as well as Will’s theory of transition. The uncovering of this aspect surprised Halpern as well. Halpern interviewed individuals with disabilities in Washington, Oregon, California, and Colorado and compared responses between all three dimensions. The data showed the strongest element of community adjustment along all three pillars was the quality and amount of communication between schools and community transition agencies (Halpern, 1985).
Halpern’s definition of transition built upon OSER’s and Will’s to include community adjustment as the end game goal. His 1985 view coupled the newer residential and interpersonal realms with the known occupational realm to form his idea of transition. He went on, in 1989, to expand his Community Adjustment Model to include important personal development aspects to his model. His adding of aspects like self-esteem, goal setting, and decision making helped empower the individual by giving them increased understanding, meaning, and ownership of their situations, and thus, quality of life (Whetstone & Browning, 2002). This addition contributed to each person’s quality of life. Based upon the Career Education and Will’s Bridges Model, Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model continues to be relevant today. This model has been accepted as the overall framework for defining transition in the IDEA, with all three pillars being dominant transition goals (Johnson & Rusch, 1993).

Within the contexts of transition and Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model comes a need for the understanding of the phrase *quality of life*. Halpern’s research not only measures transition in terms of community adjustment via occupation, living situation, and social activity, but also through quality of life. Therefore, it takes some investigation as to what this actually means and how it can be applied to the transition process. According to Halpern the actual definition of transition has evolved and is fluid. In its generic sense, transition refers to the period of time during which students leave school and begin to assume adult roles in their communities. In recent years, however, the term has also been adopted as a label for a specific program of federal support designed to enhance transition programs and services for adolescents and young adults with disabilities. The federal program began in 1984 (Will, 1984; Halpern, 1985). There were several important antecedent programs, however, which began during the 1960s and laid the foundation for current efforts. The most important of these antecedent
programs were called work-study and career education programs (Halpern, 1994, p. 194-195). Each of these programs had their own set of goals and frameworks which allowed for different interpretations of quality of life. Work-study programs first appeared in the 1960s and coupled with academic and social curriculums, gave students the opportunity to have work experience through immersion. These programs were designed to help students with disabilities to prepare for community adjustment into adulthood. The schools usually had written contracts with rehabilitation agencies that formed the basic bond these programs were built upon (Halpern, 1973; 1974; Kolstoe & Frey, 1965). These programs found acceptance in an era in which students with disabilities occupied curriculums full of remedial academics; they basically had no practical subjects, vocational skills, or independent living skills (Halpern, 1994). Programs were designed to ease students into adult life and into the community, but aspects of quality of life, living, and social life were simply inferred and never precisely described. The primary objective of work-study programs was employment; this was also the primary objective of the rehabilitation agencies working with the schools. The 1970s saw an end to this movement in favor of the newer career education programs and the associated movement.

Career education programs came from legislation, unlike the basic community relationships that forged the previous movement. The 1977 Career Education Implementation Incentive Act was responsible for the start of career education programs. This legislation addressed the post-school lives of all students, regardless of whether or not they were disabled. These programs had goals of preparing students for jobs and adult living and relied on the Council on Exceptional Children’s definition. It states

Career education is the totality of experiences through which one learns to live a meaningful, satisfying work life. Within the career education framework, work is conceptualized as conscious effort aimed at producing benefits for oneself and for others. Career education provides the opportunity for children to learn, in the least restrictive
environment possible, the academic, daily living, personal-social and occupational knowledge and specific vocational work skills necessary for attaining their highest levels of economic, personal, and social fulfillment. The individual can obtain this fulfillment through work (both paid and unpaid) and in a variety of other societal roles and personal life styles including his/her pursuits as a student, citizen, volunteer, family member, and participant in meaningful leisure time activities. (Halpern, 1994, p. 196)

Career education programs ended in the early 1980s and the transition movement, as we know it today, emerged in its place.

Halpern’s view of quality of life, most associated with his transition model, could also be applied to the first two movements. His definition contains three domains and 15 types of outcomes divided between them. The domains are physical and material well-being, performance of adult roles, and personal fulfillment. The first domain, physical and material well-being, contains the outcomes of 1) physical and mental health; 2) food, clothing and lodging; 3) safety from harm; and 4) financial security. The second domain, performance of adult roles, contains eight types of outcomes: 1) mobility and community access; 2) vocation, career, employment; 3) leisure and recreation; 4) personal relationships and social networks; 5) educational attainment; 6) spiritual fulfillment; 7) citizenship; and 8) social responsibility. The third domain, personal fulfillment, contains three outcomes: 1) happiness; 2) satisfaction; and 3) a sense of general well-being (Halpern, 1994). The transition movement required a specific definition of quality of life, not simply an inferred and non-specific one the first two movements had. In terms of understanding quality of life in transition, this specific definition was created to include all aspects of life. Most of the research previous to this had directly associated quality of life with having a job which simply is not accurate or comprehensive. A person can have a job, but still have a low quality of life; and, to invert that, a person can have great quality of life and no job at all. Halpern’s concept of quality of life lends itself to a more detailed understanding of the transition experience and his community adjustment model.
Transition in the Southeastern United States of America

The majority of transition literature has been from research that did not take place in the southeastern United States. There is, however, some literature which speaks specifically to the geographic region in which RiverPass exists. With regards to the post-school outcomes of transition programs, as defined by IDEA, some of the demographic data can be analyzed to garner a partial understanding of the transition experience in the southeastern U.S. Perhaps the most comprehensive study performed in this geographic area was a 2002 study that investigated 1393 previous special education students from Alabama. The study explored students who had attended 37 of the 128 school systems in the state and graduated between the years 1996 and 2000. The 37 school systems had incentives to take part in the study due to funding from a state transition grant. The study essentially found there was an 87% probability a student who had a job at the time of graduation would also have a job one year after employment. This is one of the factors I seek to investigate in my study along with rurality, gender, race, and disability. The Alabama Transition Initiative (ATI) is a database that annually records and shares data regarding demographics and statistics of area students with disabilities (Browning, Rabren, Whetstone, & Dunn, 2001). This database helped the study with its data collection and will help future educators with decision making and policy. Throughout the period between 1996-2000, 2,829 students receiving special education graduated from ATI participating schools. 55% of these students responded to the ATI survey one year after graduation and 1,393 indicated whether or not they were employed. Students were asked questions regarding program involvement, goals, and outcomes. Each student took two surveys; one was taken while enrolled in school and one was taken after leaving school via telephone. Student demographic information regarding school setting, gender, race, disability, and exit status was gathered via interview as well. Students with
learning disabilities had the highest employment rate compared to other disabilities. The chances of having a job one year after leaving school was more than twice as high for urban students than their rural counterparts. Males were employed 2.3 times more than females were as were students with learning disabilities compared to all other disabilities. Perhaps the most significant statistic of the entire study was that students who had a job upon leaving school were 5.1 more likely to be employed than those who did not have a job while in school. The odds were also higher for student rehab services than those who did not. The highest overall probability for employment was for males with learning disabilities who are from an urban setting and had a job upon graduating high school. Inversely, the lowest odds were for females with mental retardation from rural areas and who did not have a job upon graduation or receive rehab services. Sadly, only 25% of females reported being employed one year after high school. Type of disability played a role in job percentage as well. 61% of students with learning disabilities were employed one year after school compared to only 39% for students with mental retardation. Overall, 87% of students who had a job when leaving high school also had one a year later (Rabren, Dunn, & Chambers, 2002). This ATI database continues to function as an asset for education research in the state of Alabama and the data it produces helps make informed decisions regarding transition education.

**Summary**

This chapter discussed the existing literature regarding transition education studies, disability history in the United States, and transition models. The field of transition education is one still emerging and growing at a fast pace. There is limited data available describing transition in the southeastern United States and I hope to investigate this process more closely. The NLTS-1 and NLTS-2 have laid the statistical groundwork for transition throughout the
country. When seen through the evolving versions of IDEA, the transition process is something which has come a long way since its historical roots. There is still much work to be done in the field and a great deal of improvements to be made in order to serve students with intellectual disabilities.
CHAPTER III:

METHODOLOGY

The Qualitative Paradigm

This phenomenological study fell within the qualitative paradigm of research. By choosing qualitative research, I acknowledged there are inherent assumptions that go along with this method of inquiry. The *Sage Handbooks of Qualitative Research* have, throughout the past two decades, investigated the relationship between qualitative inquiry and the philosophical assumptions encompassed in this type of research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000, 2005, 2011). The beliefs and assumptions carried within qualitative research have many names.

These beliefs have been called paradigms (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Mertens, 2010); philosophical assumptions, epistemologies, and ontologies (Crotty, 1998); broadly conceived research methodologies (Neuman, 2000); and alternative knowledge claims (Creswell, 2009). They are beliefs about ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (what counts as knowledge and how knowledge claims are justified), axiology (the role of values in research), and methodology (the process of research). (Creswell, 2013, p. 20)

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change. (Creswell, 2013, p. 44)

The philosophical assumptions of a research project are closely related to, but still separate from, the interpretive framework the project adheres to. One way to view the relationship between the two is that one informs the other. The interpretive framework can come
from many different fields of study such as education, political science, or social justice. Most interpretive frameworks in the social science fields fall within the theoretical perspectives of; positivism, postpositivism, interpretivism, constructivism, hermeneutics, feminism, racialized discourses, critical theory, Marxism, cultural studies models, queer theory, and postcolonialism. For this project, I adopted a social constructivist interpretive framework under the larger umbrella of interpretivism.

Social constructivism is a viewpoint which seeks understanding of the world. Social constructivists seek to subjectively develop meanings of their lived experiences in terms of specific things. These developed meanings vary greatly and show the researcher how to seek the complexity and understanding of certain viewpoints as opposed to narrowing the meanings down into a few ideas or categories. The overall goal of social constructivism in research is to attempt to understand the participants’ viewpoint. The subjective meanings and views of any situation are forged by interaction amongst other people and through social, historical, and cultural norms (Creswell, 2013). Throughout my study, I attempted to understand the participants’ views of the transition process and, more specifically, the RiverPass program.

Social constructivism differs from other interpretive frameworks in that the theory is often developed throughout the data-gathering process. The research questions are broad so the participants have much freedom in forming their responses. This is a key portion of my study because the participants have intellectual disabilities. Each participant viewed the questions differently and had differing understanding and ways of conveying their viewpoint. Based upon advice from my committee members, I looked into multiple interview types for people with disabilities and settled on a conversational setting with special attention paid to nonverbal communication, cues, nodding, and interviewer-repeated confirmation. The social constructivist
framework makes use of open-ended questions to allow for participants to express themselves however they see fit. This also allows the researcher to make adjustments in the interview process based on the participant interaction and communication. The personal relationships I have with the participants enabled me to gain a deeper understanding than someone who had not previously met them before. My position and background differs from the participants in ways I must be forward and clear about. Positioning myself in terms of my historical, social, cultural, disability status, and overall background is key in my attempt to gain understanding using this framework. As the data collection process progressed, I interpreted the findings in relation to my own personal experience and attempt to understand the participants view. The overall goal of the social constructivist framework I chose is to interpret and make sense of the participants’ meanings and viewpoints of the world. These viewpoints regarding their impressions of the RiverPass program’s affects were collectively formed into the essence of the program’s life changing aspects.

The interpretive framework of social constructivism form a unique perspective from which to study. According to Creswell, this is a method of inquiry in which individual values and experiences are honored and viewpoints are approached with understanding (Creswell, 2013). Through my study, I sought understanding into the lived experience of the transition educational process through the eyes of adults with intellectual disabilities. The overarching goal of my project was to investigate narratives of RiverPass program graduates regarding their attributions of their postschool outcomes in the areas of employment, independent living, and social life.

Within the interpretive framework of social constructivism is a need for an acknowledgement regarding the power relations between the researcher and the participants.
Since within this paradigm reality is subjective from person to person, it must be stated that the understanding between researcher and participant can be very different. The participants in any given study have little control and are subject to the inquirer’s subjective interpretations on them. The participants are usually given a voice through research, but the researcher has the power to direct the path the study will take. The race, gender, and disability status of both the inquirer and the participants were acknowledged to further understanding of this relationship.

The assumptions drawn from the constructivist and social constructivism viewpoints are numerous. First, constructivists posit there is no such thing as the real world. The subjective reality depending on the person’s life circumstances is not one objective truth. There is no such thing as the objective world to the constructivist viewpoint. According to constructivist thinkers, objective reality is a fairytale that was made up to appease people desperate to be able to describe their own world in definite terms (Jaramillo, 1996).

Constructivism and social constructivism are not only views prevalent in qualitative research, but also in phenomenological research. This interpretive framework holds knowledge is constructed instead of discovered, which contrasts the neorealist view. Stake (1995) discussed three realities that come from this point of view that are applicable to this study. The first is there is an external physical reality that exists because we perceive that is does through our senses. We see the sun and sky, so we believe it is there. We hear birds, so we know they are there. Our interpretations of these stimuli are how we know they are there. The second is experiences form our personal realities so vividly and convincingly that we are unable to verify them in an objective way. We cannot remove ourselves from sensory experiences and are ever-present in them, so if it is all just an illusion we would never know. We are so very immersed in life that we cannot verify whether what we experience is real; it could theoretically all be a
dream or hallucination. The third is we extend our sensory perceptions and experiences (the first and second combined) to infer there is a universe which operates in the same way even if we have never been there or it is millions of miles away. The space time continuum suggests some of the stars we see burned out years ago, so they are not currently glowing (Stake, 1995). In a sense, we are peering into the past. The assumption the universe exists based on our very small experience and interpretation is the third, and perhaps most important, aspect of constructivism.

The theoretical framework that I chose for my project is Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model. This model is directly applicable to the RiverPass program because the program is based upon a variation of Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model. The IDEA of 1990 adopted much of its terminology and definitions of transition services from Halpern’s model (Johnson & Rusch, 1993). It is one of the most significant and prolific transition models. This framework builds on Madeline Will’s Bridges model which focused primarily on employment as the foundation to the transition experience and adds the residential and interpersonal domains (Halpern, 1985).

Halpern claimed community adjustment would be the foundation to the transition process and three pillars would build upon this foundation. The pillars he proposed were employment, residential environment, and social and interpersonal networks. Halpern’s reconceptualization also emphasized quality of life as an indicator of the success of the transition process. Simply having a job, which was the basis for Will’s model, was not enough to gauge the transition process and quality of life for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Job status, according to Halpern, while important, was just a piece or one third of the transition into adulthood. With community adjustment as the base, employment, residential environment, and social networks acting as pillars, and quality of life as a rubric, Halpern conceptualized the model which would be used by many in the field. Students, families, schools and educators continue to use his model.
today and the RiverPass program operates through a variant of this model. Halpern saw his model connecting the hands of schools and community adult service organizations in an attempt to create or continue a good quality of life for the individual. He saw the community and local social welfare programs as essential to the transition process and saw great value in employment training and postsecondary education opportunities. The end goal of transition education is bridging the gap between childhood and adulthood. The overall purpose of the Community Adjustment Model is to provide a roadmap to adulthood and Halpern’s three pillars are, in his view, the primary aspects to successful transition.

Qualitative Methods

There are five predominant approaches to inquiry within the field of qualitative research. Out of narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study methods, phenomenology is the most logical for my attempt at understanding the transition process through the eyes of RiverPass graduates. Phenomenology is similar to ethnography, but instead of learning how a specific group works, the goal of phenomenology is to develop understanding of a common meaning for a group of people and to explore a particular issue or problem using their lived experiences as a representative example (Creswell, 2013).

When comparing the five primary qualitative research approaches, the phenomenological method seems most logical to address my inquiry of the transition experience and attributions made to the RiverPass program in the postschool outcome areas of independent living, employment, and social life.

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in
their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3)

Phenomenological studies address common meaning between multiple individuals that have been through similar lived experiences of a particular phenomenon (Cresswell, 2013). These types of studies adhere to the aspects study participants have in common in terms of the phenomenon they have all experienced. In this type of research, the role of the investigator is to collect individual experiences into a description of the essence of the particular phenomenon. The primary investigator collects data from participants whom have gone through similar lived experiences or phenomena and constructs a collective description of these phenomena in the form of an essence for the participants. This is a description of what they experienced and how they did so. (Moustakas, 1994).

The basis of phenomenology is in philosophy and it tends to rely on early scholars such as; Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre. This method of inquiry is especially popular in the areas of social sciences (Borgatta & Borgatta, 1992; Swingewood, 1991). It is also popular in the field of education (Tesch, 1988; van Manen, 1990).

There are many features and characteristics present within phenomenological studies. Creswell (2013) has combined the efforts of both Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (1990) to form a comprehensive list of the seven defining features of phenomenology. These are

1. A primary emphasis on a phenomenon to explore in terms of a singular concept;
2. Exploring the phenomenon via a group of people that have all experienced the same phenomenon. This heterogeneous group may consist of as few as 3 and as many as 15;
3. A philosophical discussion regarding the foundational ideas of the phenomenon itself. This consists of the lived experiences of the participants and the ways in which they have both subjective experiences in regard to the phenomenon and objective experiences in common with other participants;
4. The primary investigator must distinguish him or herself as outside of the phenomenon by making clear his or her relationship with it and with the
participants in the study. This helps position the relationship of the investigator to the study and to the phenomenon itself;

5. The data collection effort entails interviews with participants that have personally experienced the phenomenon;

6. The data analysis uses multiple units of analysis and then descriptions that address what the participants experienced and how they did so (Moustakas, 1994); and

7. The phenomenological study comes to an end with a description of the essence of the experienced phenomenon from combining how the participants experienced the phenomenon and how they experienced the phenomenon. Together the what and the how form this essence; this is the hallmark of the entire study (Creswell, 2013).

There are two primary approaches to conducting phenomenological research. These are the hermeneutic approach and the empirical, transcendental, or psychological approach (Moustakas, 1994). The hermeneutic phenomenological approach attempts to orient research toward lived experiences and interpretation of life. This approach to phenomenology views the research as interpretive and posits the researcher as making an interpretation of the meaning of the participants lived experiences by mediating the different meanings they provide (van Manen, 1990). The transcendental or psychological approach focuses more on descriptions of the participants’ experiences and less on researcher interpretations. This approach attempts to set aside the researcher’s own experiences in order to attempt to harness a comprehensive researcher perspective in a concept known as epoche (Moustakas, 1994). This second approach is the one I plan on taking by bracketing my personal history, experience, and views with the RiverPass program and providing them up front. My study will take the transcendental or psychological approach as described by Moustakas (1994).

The procedures for phenomenological research follow a chronological step-by-step method. The first step is to determine if phenomenology is the correct approach to take toward the research problem. After consulting with my committee, we all agreed this is the best approach. The next step in the process is to recognize the philosophical assumptions of qualitative research and phenomenological research. This is addressed not only in the
assumptions, but also in the bracketing of my personal relationship with the RiverPass program. The next step was to collect data via interviewing program graduates that have experienced the phenomenon. This occurred via multiple rounds of interviews and falls within the suggested participant range of three to 15. The data analysis is the next step and consisted of highlighting significant parts of the transcriptions which provided insight and understanding to the experiences of the participants. The participant experience descriptions are called textural descriptions and the setting or context descriptions are called structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). This is known as horizontalization and the grouping of these statements is called developing clusters of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). The coding scheme included significant statements, meaning units, and textural descriptions, which were clustered into themes. The following step entails taking these statements and themes and using them to construct a written description of what the participants’ experiences were and are combined with the context and setting that informed the participant experiences. It is essential the researcher includes his or her own positionality in relation to the phenomenon. This was addressed in the researcher’s role section. The last step of the phenomenological study is to combine the textural and structural descriptions into a combined description which posits the essence of the phenomenon, also known as the essential invariant structure. This portion addressed the combined experiences of the participants in the study. The goal is for this last section to equip the reader with a better understanding of the phenomenon than they had previous to reading the study (Creswell, 2013).

The interviews performed during this study used a purposeful sampling strategy to draw out unique lived narratives of lived experiences from adults with intellectual disabilities. Interviews as a primary data collection method allowed me to play to the participants’ communication strengths with the goal of gaining the most comprehensive data and
understanding possible. Purposeful sampling adheres to three considerations as a sampling strategy for qualitative research. These are based upon the participants, the type of sampling, and the participant sample size (Creswell, 2013).

The approach taken in qualitative inquiry revolves heavily around the participants in any research effort. From a sampling standpoint, choosing participants who are unique will yield a diverse data set and thus a more comprehensive viewpoint than if the participant ground is strictly homogeneous. Maximum variation is often the sampling goal due to the unique perspectives participants can add.

Purposeful sampling is important to qualitative inquiry because it can inform a viewpoint and understanding. Researchers will purposefully select participants and data collection sites because they have the ability to provide the researcher additional and unique understanding to research problems and phenomena relevant to the study. My study included both maximum variation and stratified purposeful sampling strategies. Maximum variation sampling determines, previous to the data collection, differentiating criteria study participants possess. The participants are then selected based on differing criteria attributes. This approach ensures the inquirer will maximize the participant differences during the onset of the study. It also increases the chances of the findings illustrating uniqueness or differing perspectives amongst participants. Stratified purposeful sampling is similar to maximum variation, but instead illustrates subgroups and comparisons between participants (Creswell, 2013).

Participant sample size is a keystone part to any qualitative study, because it shapes the size and scope of the study. Creswell recommends four to five participants for a study; however, my co-chairs and I preliminarily decided this project will consist of two rounds of interviews. The first was to be around ten before dropping down to around Creswell’s recommendation for
the second and more in-depth interview sessions. As it turned out, all nine participants were included in both rounds of interviews. There were no significant criteria that ruled some out of the second round, so they were all included. Four to five participants for study would have been plenty to provide thematic analysis, but my co-chairs and I decided to go ahead with all nine.

The primary data collection type for this project was interviews. Observations were also used to a lesser extent, but only in the setting of the interview. The interview questions were both open-ended and close-ended in order to allow participants to elaborate on their experiences. In using both of these methods, I preferred open-ended questions in order to elicit a longer response containing more details than a one-word response from a close-ended question. This worked in varying degrees depending on the participant. Focus groups were not used in this study for two primary reasons. First, students are easily influenced by one another and will tend to sway toward the opinions of the more dominant personalities in the study. Secondly, the shyness and personal relationships between other participants could affect the responses and willingness to respond amongst the program graduates. The interviews were semi-structured and recorded with an electronic device. Notes were also being taken during this process. After the conclusion of each round of interviews, the audio was transcribed.

This study used the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological data collection and analysis as outlined and discussed in Moustakas (1994). This method is similar to the Van Kaam method of phenomenological research in that it primarily is used with interviews, but differs in the way the interviews are analyzed. The Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method starts with the epoche process where my own situation was described in relation to the phenomenon being studied and in relation to the participants being interviewed. After the initial process, the interview transcripts were analyzed. Transcripts were reviewed thoroughly with the goal of
identifying significant, relevant, and non-overlapping statements made by the participants.
These invariant horizons, also known as meaning units, were organized into themes. The process of directly quoting the participants, known as horizonalizing, combined with the clusters of meaning from the themes, were then grouped together to form textural descriptions which varied from student to student (Moustakas, 2004). Textural descriptions are groups of quotes which show the perceptions the students had regarding a particular topic or experience. Phenomenology is very heavy on direct quotes in order to portray the thoughts and experiences of the participants over the researcher perceptions and knowledge on the phenomenon. The researcher perspective is of little importance when compared to the participants’ perspectives.

After the textural description phase, the structural description phase, also known as imaginative variation, took place. This was done, as prescribed in Moustakas (2004), by combining the context, setting, and common participant experiences into the structural description. These structural descriptions put a heavy emphasis on what the participants experienced in common with one another as opposed to the unique invariant statements contained within the textural descriptions. When combining the textural with the structural, the essence of the RiverPass program experience and its effects were formed through the responses of the students who attended the program.

In summary, the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological research was used in this study. As discussed in Moustakas (1994), the data analysis started with the epoche process in which my reality was described in relation to the phenomenon being studied. Phenomenological reduction then followed the epoche process by horizonalizing participant statements into invariant meaning statements or direct quotes. These invariant statements were then clustered into themes. The themes were used to form individual textural descriptions for
each participant and then combined to form a composite textural description, which integrated all of the textural descriptions into a group. The structural descriptions consisting of context, setting, and common experiences was formed via imaginative variation. These structural descriptions were constructed from the vantage points and meanings from the participants. They emerged as the commonalities between what program graduates said regarding the program and were not invariant like the textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). The final step was to combine both the textural and the structural descriptions, based on interview responses, into the essence of the effect of the RiverPass program on program graduates in the areas of employment, independent living, and the social realm. The emergent concept of a parallel life without the program was something I did not plan for, but turned out to be perhaps the most significant indicator of this study.

**The Researcher’s Role**

My role in this study was to gain understanding into the narratives and outcomes of graduates of the RiverPass program. Moreover, I was interested in their attributions to the program. RiverPass has, for the past three years, been my employer through a graduate assistantship. My job assignment has included roles in teaching classes on sexuality, community involvement, decision making, communication skills, traditional academic subjects, technology, career exploration, and self-advocacy, as well as other in-class and job site instruction. I also work with the students at some of the job sites on campus the university provides each semester in the role of a job coach. Most students will have had roughly six different job experiences prior to graduation as RiverPass is a three-year program with each year consisting of two semesters. Although the program accepts students aged 18-21, not all graduates necessarily
attended the program for the full three years. Some students are not admitted until after the age of 18, which allows them less time enrolled in the program before graduating.

Due to my close relationship and knowledge of some of the more recent graduates, my view could be considered not totally objective. Although this is not the case for most of the participants in the study, a portion have received education and employment instruction from me in the past three years. However, my close proximity to the program and its students gives me a unique perspective from which to investigate and seek understanding from. I believe this to be more of a strength of the study than a weakness, because students will be familiar with me and thus willing to share their stories more willingly than to a complete stranger. Whether positive or negative, this affected the results of the interviews.

**Data Sources**

Interviews with graduates from the RiverPass program were conducted with a purposively selected sample to gain further understanding of their experiences and viewpoints regarding their attributions of their post-school outcomes. These interviews were to be digitally recorded audibly and notes taken during interview sessions. The electronically recorded interviews and notes were kept under lock and key on double password protected USB drives. In depth interviews were conducted with all the participants including their demographic information. After transcribing the interviews, follow-up interviews were conducted with participants to facilitate any clarifications to ensure in-depth understanding. This follow-up interview was especially important because many of the RiverPass participants have limitation of verbal communication which may impact the understanding of their recorded interviews. The data garnered from the second interview sessions turned out to be substantial.
Data Collection

Purposefully selected interviews took place with nine students in the first group followed by more in-depth follow up interviews with all of these individuals. The original plan was to move only about half to the second round, but we decided against this action. I interviewed graduates of the RiverPass program, based upon select attributes, to determine how the program prepared or did not prepare them for their outcomes after graduation. These attributes have been the focus of my study. Program records were used to select and contact students that have been part of as many graduating classes as possible. The participants were recruited via telephone call from numbers held within the records of the RiverPass program. The phone calls facilitated invites to potential participants to take part in the study based on their previous enrollment in the RiverPass program. Depending on the program graduate’s level of independence, the parent, family, or guardian was also contacted in a similar manner. After confirming their agreement to participate in the project, the student and guardian (where applicable) was requested to sign both verbal and written consent and assent forms to participate in the study. This signing took place either on the university campus, at the home of the participant, or at a mutually agreed upon location. The target participant size was ten with the assumption about half will be available and agree to take part in the project. This ended up being nine. The group of nine target participants embodied characteristics of a purposefully selected sample including an intentionally diverse variety of ages, races, genders, occupational statuses, social classes, disability statuses, and independent living statuses. The participant group also contained graduates from as many years as possible. The contact information used was from program records kept for each graduate. Once participation had been confirmed and the proper paperwork has been signed, the interviews took place either on the university campus or at
mutually agreed upon location. The initial interviews had a target length of two hours; however, this was varied depending on communication ability. The follow up interviews occurred with all nine participants and took place after the initial round pending first round interactions. The characteristics of the follow up interviews were not known until the first round of initial in-depth interviews have occurred. All interviews were digitally recorded and password protected to insure anonymity. The participants are adults with intellectual disabilities whom have graduated from the RiverPass program. RiverPass is a campus based program serving adults with intellectual disabilities aged 18-21. The study took place at a flagship public university in the southeastern United States.

Data Analysis

Data coding and analysis took place with the goal of extracting the essence of this phenomenological study. Epoche or personal bracketing, significant statements, meaning units, textural description, and structural description were used. My personal experiences with the RiverPass program and the graduates of the program was clearly illustrated in the data analysis of this project. Although it is impossible to completely remove myself from the context of the program and the graduates, all efforts were made to own my positionality within the program and my relationship thereof. When analyzing the transcripts, I constructed a list of significant statements about how the students experienced the RiverPass program. Horizontalization was used to do this as mentioned earlier. Themes and meaning units were then constructed from this list of significant statements. Textural descriptions, as mentioned earlier, were then used to describe what the participants experienced in the program. The next step of data analysis included how the student experience took place. This is known as structural description, as mentioned earlier. The setting and context were also addressed at this time. The final step of
data analysis included constructing a composite description of the student’s experiences (phenomenon) by combining the textural and structural descriptions. This combination forms the essence of the experiences and is the apex of a phenomenological study. This part also combines the what with the how in the study. The research question for this project were as follows: What do the narratives of RiverPass program graduates reveal about the extent to which they attribute their post-school outcomes to their experiences in the program in the areas of employment, independent living, and social realm.

Verification

Data was also validated and verified with participants after the interview process. I used more than three of the eight strategies of validation, as presented by Cresswell and Miller (2000), to ensure accurate and thorough data acquisition. These strategies are prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer review or debriefing, clarifying researcher bias, member checking, rich and thick description, and external audits.

Ethical Considerations

The population I investigated is one with intellectual disabilities. These transition program graduates were enrolled in the RiverPass program from ages 18-21 at an IHE in the southeastern United States. The graduates have impaired decision-making abilities and are from a marginalized population. Although they are adults in the legal sense, their neurodiversity spans from low-functioning to very little disability present. Some of the common disabilities encompassed in this population are autism, Down syndrome, intellectual disabilities, and developmental disabilities.

This study was reciprocal to both the participant population and to the public because it investigated graduates of a transition program at an IHE with an excellent track record and
reputation. The program has a job placement rate of roughly 87% compared to the national job placement rate of transition graduates of 15% (Mutua, 2015). Studying the experiences and attributions of program graduates helps other educational institutions use the best practices and methods for successful students learned at RiverPass. This helps adults with intellectual disabilities worldwide by investigating and potentially emulating a successful model for positive post-school outcomes for adults with intellectual disabilities in the realms of employment, independent living, and social life. Documenting what has worked previously for students can lend to future success stories and future research into the field of transition. The project helped individuals without intellectual disabilities by contributing to the research available to educators and academic scholars alike. As more and more transition programs are created, the body of literature is growing to help new programs make informed decisions. By educating the public about the vast potential students with intellectual disabilities have, perhaps better understanding can occur between the two populations. Groups both with and without intellectual disabilities can learn from each other. I have personally learned much more from RiverPass students than they have learned from me. Understanding groups that are in some ways different from your own is a powerful teaching tool.

**Plan for Narrative**

After the interview process and, I used the thematically coded data to construct chapters four and five. Chapter IV addressed the yields from the interviews. These findings were viewed through Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model to strive towards an understanding of RiverPass program graduates’ attributes of program effects. These findings were explored through narratives and attempting to view experiences through the participants’ eyes. Chapter V explored the conclusions, discussions, and suggestions based upon the content of Chapter IV.
Summary

This chapter discussed the elements of qualitative inquiry and the reasoning behind this choice of methodology. The frameworks and theories of my study weaved together to form holistic viewpoints from the perspectives of the transition program graduates taking part in this project. The overall goal of the study was to investigate how graduates of RPP view the program as having effected their post-school outcomes in employment, independent living, and the social realm of their lives. Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model was the primary lens through which the study took form and presented itself.
CHAPTER IV:
RESULTS

This chapter will discuss the data collected and aspects of the collection process. Interviews were conducted on two occasions for each participant with the first being primarily demographic and the second focusing on the three pillars of Halpern’s model. Participants chose their own interview locations for both sessions. Of the nine program graduates, one chose a community recreation center for both interviews, eight chose an office setting for the first interview session, six chose a conference room for the second interview, one chose a personal home for the second interview, and one chose a campus student center for a second interview. It is important to note my previous relationship with each student allowed the interview process to commence with fluidity without apprehension or fishing for answers, which may have been the case with someone the participants did not know. Adults with intellectual disabilities often struggle with communication and having prior knowledge of their abilities, disabilities, communication strengths and weaknesses, and personal information led to this process going smoothly. Without my prior work at RiverPass, this project would not have been possible. I gained access and insight to all of their lives through my working at the RiverPass program and because of the connection with each participant, I was able to conduct this study. As an adult male without a profound intellectual disability, my life experience and background is different from the participants in this study. My education level and years on this planet yield a different lived reality than the participants in my study. That being said, I have a unique insight into each of their lives most people do not have the privilege of experiencing. My personal relationship
with each graduate and the nuances of their personalities contributes to my viewing of them as more normative than someone who does not know them. I know each of their strengths and weaknesses and because of this, see great potential in each of them most would not see. This chapter is organized into textural and structural descriptions through the use of participant quotations. Horizontalizing the participant responses by quoting them is one of the hallmarks of the phenomenological perspective. The quotes are then developed into clusters of meaning known as themes. Combining the horizontalization and clusters of meaning form the textural descriptions. The structural descriptions, also known as imaginative variation, consist of contexts, settings, and common experiences of the program graduates. The final step in this chapter is to combine the textural and structural descriptions to form the essential invariant structure known as the essence or the phenomenon being studied.

Data were collected using a two-round interview approach with each of the nine participants. The first round included primarily demographic information and the second round included interview questions which tapped into post-school outcomes as conceptualized by IDEA (2004) and the Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model. Additionally, capitalizing on the primary researcher’s prior knowledge of the participants, he was also able to draw from the participants’ experiences and the situations and contexts that shaped them. Participants were asked to indicate where they wanted the interviews to take place. They chose an office setting, student center on campus, their home, or the RiverPass classroom.

Together, the participants’ responses to the interview questions, their life experiences, background, and the situations and contexts they described were all taken into account in coming up with both individual and collective themes which comprised the essential invariant structure or the essence of the phenomenon studied. These are comprised of the participants’
attributions of their post-school/adult outcomes. In this case, it is the RiverPass program (RPP) and the effects it did or did not have on graduates of the program.

Data analysis involved first identifying the essential themes from the participants’ descriptions of the role of RiverPass to their adult outcomes. Essential themes were either individual or collective. Specifically, a list was constructed of significant statements made by the participants. This list contained essential phrases which highlighted how graduates viewed the RiverPass program. These statements were grouped together into themes that comprised meaningful units which further comprised the collective themes. The experiences of the participants in the RiverPass program included what the participants experienced in the program. The descriptions were of how the experiences occurred, also known as a structural description. This included the context in which the RiverPass program was experienced. The final data analysis step took place by constructing a composite description of by synthesizing both the textural and structural descriptions. Through this technique, I arrived at the essence of the effect of the RiverPass program on the participants through their descriptions of what they experienced and how they experienced it.

This chapter will discuss the primary investigator’s positionality in order to inform the remainder of the study and the role experience played in it. This description of the primary investigator’s experience will describe the relationship with the RiverPass program and participants in this study in an effort to present the homophily within the study and the relationships thereof. This is done in a forefront manner and in an attempt to focus the energy on the participants of the study. This process is known as epoche and is executed with the intent of distancing the project from oneself. In order to be truly open to participants in the project,
acknowledging my previous experience and knowledge must be at the beginning of my data analysis to make it known who I am and how this plays into my project.

**Positionality and Epoche**

The RiverPass program and the university housing it have been a fundamental part of my life for the past four years. The idea for my dissertation came from my involvement with the program. The intellectual disability community around campus and the city surrounding it is not very large and program graduates generally stay in touch with each other through community events and programs. It is a community I have been privileged to get to know and become involved with. I have been fortunate to get to know program students and graduates through my job and would not have been able to conduct this project without the relationships built during my time working at the university. The comfort and familiarity each participant has with me enabled open and honest dialogue to take place. The participants likely would not be comfortable speaking with someone they do not know. Knowing about each of their lives and personal traits has been an enormous advantage to me being able to successfully interview each participant. It can be very difficult to garner answers to interview questions when dealing with participants who have intellectual disabilities, but having prior relationships with them has been essential to the success of my interviews. Being aware of the communication and comfort limits of each participant has provided me with insight as to how to conduct the interviews and how to read both verbal and nonverbal cues alike. It can be quite a task to get answers from adults with intellectual disabilities and had I not known them already, it would have been impossible. The prior relationship with each program graduate was essential to the interview dialogue and without these relationships this study could not have succeeded. I assume many of the participants would not be willing to be interviewed by someone they did not know and even if
they would be willing, the interviewer could not possibly understand the context of each answer in the way an interviewer could who had known them for a number of years prior.

In phenomenological research, it is critical the researcher set aside their own realities and take a renewed look at the phenomenon under investigation through their positionality and epoche (Creswell, 2013). For this reason, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge who I am and how I chose to research this topic with these participants.

My reality is different than those from with whom this research was conducted. I am a 33-year-old white male who grew up in a middle-class suburb of Birmingham, Alabama, without a significant intellectual disability. I graduated with an undergraduate degree from Auburn University and a master’s degree from The University of Alabama in Birmingham (UAB). I am currently pursuing my doctorate degree in from the university where the RiverPass program is located. During my doctoral career, I was presented an opportunity to work as a graduate assistant within the RiverPass Program. Even though I had never worked with students with intellectual disabilities in the past, the possibility of being a positive male role model to the students within this program both intrigued and excited me as well as offered me an insight into higher education that was educationally cutting edge.

During my assistantship, I served in various capacities such as instructor, job coach, life coach, and friend, all of which enabled me to build deep personal relationships with each of the students. Additionally, my time in the program has shaped my new positionality as a supporter and advocate of the abilities and possibilities for individuals with significant intellectual disabilities in higher education. It is from this new position with which the growing need for research in outcomes developed.
I recognize prior to this study I had a specific lens I viewed the students and their experience through, as an able bodied and minded white man who was teaching and supporting certain skills I hoped they were learning. However, doing this research has given me an insight as to what they are taking away from this learning from their standpoint. It is allowing me to see what I am enmeshed in daily from their eyes and truly understand now what they know based on what they are actually telling me instead of what I see through my lens.

Moreover, I would be negligent if I did not also mention I believe the familiarity in relationships I have been able to cultivate during my time in working with these students over the past several years has given me certain comfort and rapport that allows for open and honest dialog to take place. Likewise, being aware of the inherent communication challenges of this population has operated as an advantage in knowing ways to conduct more productive interviews and read both the verbal and non-verbal cues my participants were giving throughout. It has been through these dialogs their unique and rich understandings of themselves and their experiences within the program have emerged. The relationships I have forged with students, graduates, coworkers, and administrators have had a positive effect on me personally and professionally and the RiverPass program has become a significant part of my life. After investing four years teaching there, and having the experiences I have, both good and bad, I can honestly say it is my favorite job I have ever had. Getting to know the students and how they operate has taught me more than a book or class ever could. My relationship and experience with the program has given me the familiarity necessary to take on this project which would be impossible otherwise. Looking at records would not be sufficient in order to understand the lives of each RiverPass student along with their strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, a personal relationship with each of the participants in my study has been a huge advantage and mandatory
necessity to conduct these interviews. This study simply could not take place if these relationships were not in place.

**Findings**

In the following section, first, I present the demographic findings about each of the individual participants based upon Round 1 of the interviews. This is then followed by the horizontalization of the statements made by each participant related to the three areas of transition/post-school outcomes as articulated in Halpern's model of community adjustment. Specifically, Halpern's model focuses on employment, independent living, and the social realm. These horizontalized statements are drawn primarily from the Round 2 of interviews and Round 1 where applicable. In Round 2, I dug deeper into the participants' perceptions of what they learned at the RiverPass program and how it affected their lives in the three areas of Halpern's community adjustment model. The horizontalized statements comprise non-repeating essential statements related to each of the three areas for each of the nine individual participants. Finally, I arrived at collective themes comprised the essence of the participants' attributions of their post-school outcomes to RPP based upon a critical examination of the horizontalized statements of each individual participant.

Because of the tendency of the participants to respond in ways they perceived as telling me what I needed to know, during the second round of interviews, I asked them questions that required them to think about their lives as they were at the time of interview and what their lives would have been like without having attended RiverPass program (RPP). Due to my previous knowledge of the participants and of the population in general, I observed this tendency during the first round of interviews. As such, by asking them to respond based upon their current situations and their perception of what their lives would have been like had they not attended
RPP turned out to be the most effective way for me to pull information from the participants and to get their viewpoints about their own transitions into adulthood. The questions focused around Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model and the three pillars that form the model. The three pillars are the employment realm, the independent living realm, and the social realm. After discussing the pillars with each participant, I asked them to tell what they think their life would have been in these areas without the RiverPass program. The participants’ views of the effects the RiverPass program produced in their lives are contained in their responses. The approach of drawing a parallel to what life would have been like without the program lends much insight into how significant RPP was to each of them. The communication and comprehension abilities of the participants in this study vary considerably. Due to this diversity, the size and scope of interview question responses range from one word to multiple paragraphs. It was my goal in this project to include the perspective of all participants and to make use of their responses regardless of length, complexity, and/or clarity. The brevity of some of their responses does not make them any less valuable to the study.

Parker

Parker is a 22-year-old African-American male. When asked what his disability was he responded, “he has a steel rod in his back.” He clarified further, “I have trouble sometimes understanding simple things.” His program eligibility records indicate he has an intellectual disability and graduated from RiverPass in May of 2016. Parker was very polite and eager to please. As such, during the interview, he may have exaggerated a few of his responses believing that was what I wanted to hear or what the right answer was. This was evident in his non-verbal communicative behaviors. For instance, throughout the interview process, he nodded vigorously, sat at the edge of his seat, smiled all through, and squinted appearing to attempt to decipher what
I wanted him to say. This participant works part-time as a custodian at a food court on the campus of the university where he received his transition education. His work is primarily cleaning and taking out trash in addition to other custodial tasks. Additionally, he is a licensed barber and cuts hair on the weekends. Parker and his grandfather have been patrons of the same barbershop where he works for decades. Being part of the social community at the barbershop not only gave Parker an outlet for a job, but it provided the barbershop opportunity to make an investment into Parker’s life. From this community aspect, Parker made the necessary connections to become a licensed barber and receive the proper training and apprenticeship opportunities. Indeed, Parker’s internship at the barbershop while he was at RPP had been prompted by his grandfather who gave the barbershop information to the RPP personnel to set up a semester long internship. Parker indicated in the interviews although he does get paid, the barbershop is very much a social and communal outlet for friends and citizens of the community to gather and socialize. Clearly Parker enjoyed the time he spent at the barbershop on the weekends when he got to hang out with other guys. Parker has held both jobs for the past two years. Compared to other participants in this study, his communication skills were above average.

Parker lives with his grandparents locally and has one brother and one sister who live with his parents in another city. His grandparents take care that he has everything he needs. Parker is on the higher end of the socioeconomic status spectrum compared to the other eight participants in this study. He is always clean, well dressed, and is well taken care of by his grandparents. Although they provide everything he needs, his grandparents could be considered overbearing and tend to stifle his independence by treating him like a younger child than his age represents. Based on his responses, Parker does not seem to really know why his parents and
siblings live in another city while he lives with his grandparents. He loves his grandparents and indicated they love him too. “We take care of each other,” he said in an interview when asked about his grandparents.

**Employment.** Parker made several invariant statements regarding his employment outcomes. The following represents his non-repeating essential statement about his employment:

> The RPP helped me get my job, job training, and helped me to get where I'm at now and gave me lots of experience in different areas of work like cleaning, dusting, mopping, taking out the trash and other stuff.

The other ways this statement was expressed included single word or two-word phrases like the fact he had not had any employment experience before RPP and that RPP gave him opportunities to work at different jobs such as at the student book store, conference center, and the barbershop. Additionally, he made statements like “I like it that I have 2 different jobs,” and he aspired be a supervisor: “I see myself as a supervisor.” And he liked that “I make more money now.” When Parker was presented with the parallel scenario where he did not attend RPP, his response was that without RPP, “I would have a hard time getting employed.”

**Independent living.** With regard to independent living, though Parker still lives at home with his grandparents and reported seeing his parents and siblings “every blue moon.” During the interview, he made several statements that indicated that he valued the skills and experiences gained in RPP that prepared him to live independently. The following are his invariant statements about independent living: “RPP helped me to learn how to save my money, manage my money, and spend it wisely. It helped me to help my [grand]parents around the house with chores.”

He appreciated the skills he acquired at RPP that have made it possible to him to help his grandparents such as doing dishes. For instance, they help him with money management and
transportation to work and he lifts the heavy stuff. He stated, “I go with him [grandfather] to the store like say he needs help lifting something - I lift the heavy stuff for him.” However, overall, he saw his relationship with his grandparents and mutually beneficial to each other where he helped them, and, at the same time, they helped him.

I asked him what he thought his life at home would be if he had not been to RPP. His statement was “I would still be living at home, and wouldn’t know how to manage and save money.” Then he made other statements like “RiverPass taught me how to be a more mature adult and how to be an independent one.” Parker realized the freedom he enjoyed was in part made possible by his ability to earn his own money and decide how to spend it, for instance, he hoped to buy a car.

**Social realm.** On the social realm, Parker described himself as having tendencies to keeping to himself. So, he attributed his sociability to RPP with statements like “I would be quiet and not sociable and not know how to get along with other people.” He felt RPP made it possible for him “to be myself.” Also, he stated RPP made it possible for him “to be able to communicate with people from other culture.”

Without RPP, he thought he “would be quiet, not sociable, and not know how to get along with other people.” Overall, without RiverPass, he stated that “I would be unemployed and not have any friends. I would just be quiet and not know anything about the world and how to live independently.”

Parker expressed an interest in obtaining a girlfriend and starting a long-term relationship as a future goal of his. He also expressed interest in moving up to full-time employment in order to have enough money to live on his own. When asked what his life goals were, he responded, “Work, make a whole lot of money, play sports, and learn more on how to drive.” He also
expressed interest in attending an Oakland Raiders game one day in California and visiting Puerto Rico that he had “heard was nice.” Eventually, Parker wants to own his own house and have a wife and he hopes to still work at the food court. He thinks his grandfather would be proud of him, but that his grandmother thinks he still is not ready. He said, “Basically, I’m still working, trying to be more independent, trying to be more athletic, and looking for me a girlfriend.”

Jana

Jana is a 22-year-old African-American female. She has intellectual disability and cerebral palsy. Consequently, she uses a power wheelchair. Her motor skills are limited, but she was one of the highest in cognitive functioning among the participants in this study. However, her educational experience did not begin this way. She spoke extensively about the low expectations that had been set for her at her previous school before RPP.

For me I came from a school where no one communicated. Not to be rude, but at my schools before RPP, no one knew how to hold a conversation and I had no one to talk to. At RPP they would talk back to me and share the same interest. It was very remarkable. Once I established who I was and started speaking up, I began to grow and develop friendships that have followed me throughout the years. My friends now still push me out of my box to talk to new people. This is a huge thing for me. Throughout elementary school I was pretty mainstream and independent. When I had my hip surgery they took out my right hip and I lost that and I was really depressed. I had an x-ray a couple weeks later and all the doctor could say was "I'm sorry" he messed up on the surgery. He told me I would never stand or take a step. I didn’t know how to communicate and gave up on myself. It was really hard. I was in diapers for two years. My physical therapist tried to motivate me, but she couldn’t. At RPP I had to find the right restroom in a different building and practice really hard, but eventually I got it. I started caring and getting my confidence back. I was really proud of myself. Before I came to RPP, I couldn’t see myself doing all that I do now. People all around the world know about me now. She was also considered a leader in the RPP when she was a student. During the interview, she spoke with pride about starting a disability advocacy organization on campus while she was a student in RPP. For nearly two years, she has worked part-time as a support
staff for the dean’s office in the college of education where she graduated from RPP. As office staff, she runs errands on campus, delivers documents, delivers payments, performs data entry, and performs account service tasks. She graduated from RiverPass in 2016 and lives with her grandmother close to the campus where she works. Her grandmother became her legal guardian at the age of seven. She said,

My mom and dad are very unstable people so it is hard. I talk to my mom every so often. We don’t really see each other much. My grandmother is basically my mom. I was not happy before RPP. I had a lot of emotional stuff going on that I didn’t understand. I felt like my mom had given up and abandoned me. I wondered why she didn’t like me. I have since made peace with that. At home the emotional support just isn’t there. My family doesn’t hug or talk about feelings or say I love you or talk about relationships. My white friends do talk about these things. I am intertwined between both cultures. It is hard switching back and forth. I can talk about these things with my white friends.

She takes public transportation to and from work. Compared to other participants in this study, she had excellent communication skills. She tended to be verbose in her answers.

During the first interview, she talked extensively about her public-school experience prior to attending RPP. She spoke of giving up on herself and contemplating suicide.

My junior year of high school I was like, “I’m Done,” I just cut my hair off and completely gave up on myself, didn’t care about my appearance at all, I didn’t care about myself. It was the overall experience, teachers, students, etc. I gave up in high school and experienced bullying. I was done.

She described how she now sees herself and her aspirations are no longer limited by her disability. She said, “If I don’t open my mouth when first meeting people they assume I am not capable of a job or having friends. When they have a conversation with me they can then decide for themselves.” She stated further, “I learned not to put my disability in a box, my disability doesn’t define me, limits are all in my mind, I can do whatever I put my mind to, who cares if I have a disability as long as I think I can do something, I can do it.”
When asked how the RPP affected her life, Jana responded, “It has affected my life tremendously. Before I came to RPP, I couldn’t see myself doing all that I do now. People all around the world know about me now.” Jana made several statements that drew sharp contrast between who she was at the moment compared to how she used to be previously, attributing many of those changes to her experience in RPP.

**Employment.** Jana’s invariant statement regarding her employment outcome.

The following statement most aptly captures her sentiments.

I work in the College of Ed. in the office of financial affairs, without RPP I wouldn’t have the job. The connection was made through RPP. I think it’s a good fit. Through the RPP I got lots of job experience. I had the chance to have accessible job sites for the first time in my life. Due to my physical limitations, the program helped me find my interests and what was realistic. I work in the College of Ed in the office of financial affairs, without RPP I wouldn’t have the job. The connection was made through RPP. I think it’s a good fit.

When asked about her job situation without having attended RPP, she responded, “I honestly don’t think I would have a job.”

**Independent living.** Our conversation turned to independent living after talking about employment. She opened up about the difficulties of living in a home not designed for her and linked that to what she took from the RPP. “My home is not accessible. I learned how to make the best of a bad situation. I do what I can. RPP taught me how to hold myself to higher standards.” When asked about what her living situation at home would be like without the RPP, she proclaimed,

It’s all about mentality. Without RPP I wouldn’t be able to do anything at all. Not even get out of my wheelchair, shower, or go to the bathroom. I didn’t want to learn how to go to the bathroom by myself because I thought what’s the point, I’m never going to do anything in life, then a lightbulb went off and I realized what I had been missing, then things started getting better.
She later exclaimed, “Something just clicked for me. I really look forward to when I can support myself in my own apartment with minimal help. RPP helped open my eyes to the possibility of living on my own.”

**Social realm.** It was evident early in this particular interview that this participant held the social aspect of transition in high regard due to the connections it can foster. She linked most of her relationships in the community back to RPP in one way or another. She said,

I met almost all of my best friends through the program in some way. Campus is and it is the center of my life. It’s the only accessible part of [my home town]. It’s also the only place I can meet up with people.

Throughout the interviews, she often said many aspects of her life were dependent on connections she made at RPP and heavily reliant on the social aspect of transition. She explained further, in the following invariant statements,

For one I wouldn’t have the friends I have. I also wouldn’t have experienced all the stuff through PARA. I love being on campus. My life is on campus. I like being in a controlled environment with people I trust. I have terrible anxiety. I would be like just calling random people and not realizing people have a life. I honestly think I would be dead now that I think about it. I don’t think I would have known how to reach out. My friends are everything. I was able to travel to multiple cities, present at conferences, and am going to be a published author soon all because of RPP.

For me I came from a school where no one communicated. Not to be rude, but at my schools before RiverPass, no one knew how to hold a conversation and I had no one to talk to. At RiverPass they would talk back to me and share the same interest. It was very remarkable. RPP was the first time I was around such smart people with ID that could communicate. It was great and blew my mind. Once I established who I was and started speaking up, I began to grow and develop friendships that have followed me throughout the years. My friends now still push me out of my box to talk to new people. I met almost all of my best friends through the program in some way.

After discussing the employment, social, and independent living post school outcomes per the three pillars of Halpern’s model, in her life as it is and in her life as she imagined it would be without RPP, Jana embarked on a very powerful monologue that spoke to the importance of the RPP and the profound effect it had on her life. She began speaking and I listened attentively.
Without RPP I wouldn’t be alive today. In January of 2014 is when I really first started seeking counseling. A teacher would take me. After 6 months my counselor terminated me, it wasn’t good. I had to go due to the suicidal thoughts that I shared with the teacher. I wrote her a letter and told her that I was thinking about killing myself and that I didn’t know what to do. She had to report it. That was the first episode. Yeah. Life is tough at home. I don’t have parents to go to with this stuff. It’s just different when you don’t have parents, it’s harder. My mom is bipolar and you don’t know what you’re going to get. I tried to keep silent, but in February of 2016 another incident happened. I was really depressed over the weekend and reached out to a friend two days after my 21st birthday. Her and another friend drove down from Birmingham and got me, we sat in the car and talked about everything inside my head. I needed that. I met them through church, but through RPP actually. Yeah. The teachers helped me a lot. She did what was best for me, but also had to because of the hurt rule. I came to school the next day, but she sent me home and said I had to be cleared by a doctor to return. She did it because she cared. No one else has cared like she has. She knows that. I learned to manage my situation through RPP in many ways. Without RPP I wouldn’t be at all. I would be dead. Through RPP my life has opened up in so many ways. It’s a game changer, a world changer. RPP is an opportunity that is potentially lifesaving.

Jeremy

Jeremy is a 28-year-old African-American male graduated from RiverPass in 2011. Jeremy is married to his college sweetheart whom he met while attending RiverPass. Together, they have a six-month-old son and is one of two participants in this study who has children. Jeremy lives with his wife, son, and mother. Jeremy has a driver’s license and a car he shares with his wife. His experience is unique because his is an adult with an intellectual disability that has a child. He and his wife both took part in the study. Like all other participants in this study, he has an intellectual disability that inhibited his ability to process some of the interview questions. Jeremy stated he receives help: “At my momma’s house in Tuscaloosa…My momma and my wife…She helps with the baby now.” He spoke slowly, but in a clear manner. He works full-time at a fraternity house on the campus of the IHE where RPP was located. He performs cleaning tasks inside and outside the building.
Jeremy was enthusiastic when I asked what he thought of the RPP. He exclaimed prior to any of the interview questions that, “It taught me how to go get a job, get my license, and do independent living. [The teacher] taught us employment skills, to live on our own, how to get a job, how to be on time.” This statement where he volunteered information in an unprompted manner was interesting because by and large he was not nearly as verbose as some of the other participants. His responses were succinct and to the point.

**Employment.** When our conversation turned to the employment outcomes in his life and how it related to the RPP, the invariant statement that captured his descriptions about employment was this. He said, “It helped me learn how to clean and do all the other good stuff at the jobs. Shred paper, work with other people, put books in the right place. I got my job because of RPP.” I followed that up with a transition into his parallel life without RPP to which he replied, “I would still be trying to find a job.”

**Independent living.** After the employment discussion, I asked how the RPP affected the independent aspect of his life. His response included the statement he learned “How to keep things clean, wash clothes, put them up. Yep, pay bills, budget money, buy groceries, eat out, cook…I learned a lot. How to go out and work on my own, make money, give speeches, be independent.” Jeremy was a featured keynote speaker at an RPP graduation ceremony a few years ago hence his reference to giving speeches. In this statement, his reference to paying bills, buying groceries, and cooking were important to him because for a while having those skills had made it possible for him to live on his own. However, the advent of a baby made it impossible for him to live without additional assistance hence he and his wife moved in with his mother. He and his wife were verbally thankful for the assistance his mother provides. When asked to
imagine his life without RPP, he stated “I wouldn’t know how to live on my own, but I do now. I would just be stuck in my room all the time.”

**Social realm.** This participant had a tendency to link together all three pillars into one group. This made the transition into the social realm an easy part of the interview. He said,

I learned how to make friends, who to trust and who not to trust in the world… We were doing things in the community, going to the grocery store, going to the bank, we cooked, the dances, dinner and movies, bowling, Shakespeare festival.

It was clear in his responses that he was thankful for the experiences he had at RPP. He said,

I wouldn’t have my best friends without RPP. I might not be married to my wife. Without RPP life would be worse. I would be sitting at home all day long. Not as many friends and wouldn’t know how to live on my own. I probably wouldn’t have a job.

On future aspirations, Jeremy stated that “I want to teach my son how to be a hard-working man and I want to go to Six Flags one day.”

**Andrea**

Andrea is 25-year-old, African-American female who graduated in 2013 from the program. She has an intellectual disability and is currently unemployed. Andrea is Jeremy’s wife and mother to a six-month old baby boy. She and her husband brought the baby with them to meet me for the interview. Andrea has a significant speech impairment that affects others’ ability to understand her. Because of this, she spoke much less than the other participants in this study. When asked about her disability, Andrea said, “(I have an) intellectual disability, I can’t read good. It takes me a little bit extra to learn, people have to show me how to do things.”

Although many of her friends can understand, I found it difficult to understand her during the interview process. This became slightly easier the more we talked. As she became more comfortable with the interview process, I would repeat what she said and she would nod yes or no to confirm or deny whether that is what she said. This process became more effective the
longer we spoke. During the first-round interview, I pondered whether or not it would be possible to interview her with my limited understanding of her speech, but to my surprise, I was able to understand her. I noticed her husband and two best friends had no trouble understanding her presumably due to the amount of time they have spent with her. Still, her responses were short and to the point or one word answers or she would nod or shake her head for yes and no, respectively. It is unique that not only does she have a child with another participant in this study, but she and her husband went to the courthouse and got married without her family’s consent. She would go on to say this would not have been possible without the knowledge she acquired at RPP and she likely would not be married, have a baby, or have experience living on her own without having attended the program.

**Employment.** While she had been out of the program for four years, she had not yet been able to secure employment. But in speaking about RPP’s impact on her outcomes related to employment, she one invariant statement: “It taught me to save money and be on time.” Likewise, with independent living and her post-school outcomes in her social realm, her statements were clipped and precise. Because of the significant limitations in expressive verbal communication, she did not do much elaborating.

**Independent living.** She stated RPP taught her to “Cook, manage money, doctors, [and] live on my own.” Of all the participants in this study, Andrea expressed the most sense of disconnect—almost a nostalgia. She stated that she was on the phone most of the day. Although she and her husband temporarily lived on their own with their baby son, they found that living situation was not ideal and that they needed the additional help of her mother-in-law and decided to move back in with her.
Social realm. Hence, her the outcomes in the were “I liked it because everyone was like me.” However, despite not having achieved many of the outcomes the other participants had, she was very aware of he how vastly different her life might have been without RPP. On employment, her statement was she “wouldn’t know how to get a J-O-B” and “would be in a group home” and on the social realm, she “would not have my three best friends...[or]...have a baby or a husband.” On her future aspirations, she said, “I want to go back to school and live on my own and go to Hawaii. I also want a job and to be on my own.” It was evident in her responses that she yearned to return to some type of educational setting and missed the RPP.

Kirsten

Kirsten is a 25-year-old African-American female who graduated from RiverPass in 2013. She is currently unemployed, but does hair and babysits regularly for her friends Andrea and Jeremy. She lives with her mother, grandmother, grandfather, and cousin. Due to her grandparents’ ages, she claims that her workload is significant at home and credits RPP with the skills that she uses every day. She dates Andrew, another participant who was in Jeremy’s cohort at RPP. She and Andrea graduated together and are best friends. The group of four claim to be best friends and are around each other all of the time. Kirsten has an intellectual disability and had good communication skills compared her two friends, Andrea and Jeremy, her husband.

Employment. While she credited RPP where “[she] learned how to do paperwork, files, put books in order, how to clean, stocking,” she has been unemployed since graduating from the program. While she spoke of wanting to find a job, she did not appear to be committed to finding one. She said, “Without RPP I wouldn’t know how to do a real interview and a resume. I also wouldn’t know what to do and what not to do in the interview.”
Independent living. On independent living, Kristen said,

I learned how to wash clothes, how to meet new people, how to shake hands, and how to keep your house up…I wouldn’t know how to spell or read or write. I used to go to regular schools, but they didn’t teach me nothing for real because I was kinda slow and stuff. So, I went to RPP to get one on one help.

Social realm. Kirsten said that she

…didn’t like regular schools. People always talked about me because I couldn’t read or write. Being at RPP helped me out. The teachers took their time to teach me properly…Without RPP I wouldn’t have no friends. I would probably still be at home without a job. I wouldn’t have job experience or friends or know any people like me. I wouldn’t know how to read or write.

Kirsten’s future goals included being

married, with my own house and my own children and a job. Two girls and two boys. I also want to go out of town like to Haiti. Ain’t that Haiti where you can help people? I want to about the children, can’t you adopt the children from there? Or I guess adopt children from Haiti, I guess I’ll have a million children then…[she also wanted to know] How to live on your own. How to get a job…I don’t have a job. How to be independent.

In answer to how RPP impacted her, several invariant statements emerged.

Write stuff down. To live on your own. Around the university - places around the university and different things you could do on the job. How to do different jobs…I used to be shy and now I’m wide open. I used to wouldn’t talk much. And I made friends that I wouldn’t have made at the other schools. I felt like a college student. I know I won’t be able to go to a real college so RiverPass helped me to make me feel like I was at college.

Andrew

Andrew is a 28-year-old African-American male who has an intellectual disability and speech impairment that limits his ability to speak clearly. The speech impairment is much less evident when he speaks slowly, which he is aware of and has made progress enacting. He graduated from the RiverPass program in 2011 and works full-time at a fraternity house on campus. At the fraternity house, he “eat breakfast then clock in, check the ice and drinks, fill cups, mop, sweep, clean dining room, jump from that to the TV room, stairs, hallways, main
bathroom, study room, laundry room, stairwell, mop and sweep all these.” He has a driver’s license and his own car. He is best friends with Jeremy, Andrea, and his girlfriend is Kirsten. This group of four consider themselves best friends. This connection was made through RPP. Andrew lives with his mother. When asked what all he learned at RPP, he responded, “How to save my money up, how to communicate with other people, how to speak clearly with other people, job fairs, meeting new people.” He suggested that other applicable students give RPP a try and said, “Go for it. You will have fun, learn a lot of stuff, build your confidence, and more. It makes people with disabilities feel more better in life. They can do anything they want to do. Drive cars, be a rapper, anything they want.”

**Employment.** The invariant statements related to employment were “[RPP] Teach me a lot of stuff. How to come to work on time, do things correctly, how to find work, how to be on top of the workers, communication skills. I got my job because of RPP.”

**Independent living.** On RPP, he said, “It taught me how to manage money, shop for food, pay bills, cook, cleaning.” Without RPP, he stated that “It would be hard. Wouldn’t have any job skills...Probably be borrowing money and messing up my money. RPP helped me a lot.”

**Social realm.** Andrew enjoyed social activities that he participated in while at RPP. HE said, “I got to travel with PARA, met my best friends, I could just be myself.” Without RPP he thought he would be doing “bad stuff.” He qualified his meaning by opening up about his experience in jail and the possibility of going to prison. He stated, I got a lot of family in there. Lot of family do bad stuff, sell drugs, in gangs, all that stuff. They taught me how to do that stuff. They had that money. I thought if I do this there is not telling how much money I would make, but I saw the bad stuff, the bad side of it. If I got caught with drugs, nobody would take no charge for me and I would get hauled off to prison. So, I told myself that I wasn't going to do that. I wasn't going to do no drugs. I thought about it. They have to pay for the drugs and get the drugs to sell the
drugs and using their money too. I said I don't want to do that. I would end up with some time. Yeah family members and my dad are in there. My dad is locked up for selling drugs. I visited him in prison a few times. I learned from that. Yeah. Never going back. I got out of trouble a couple times, but the first time I really got caught I got scared. My dad in Huntsville prison knows some killers in there. I said to myself I aint going there. I learned enough just from the pat down to visit and I wasn't even doing a bid. Dad told me "I'm gonna see you in here one day". I said no you aint! Without RPP I would be in prison, doing that bad stuff for real.”

Andrew claimed his future aspirations were the following:

I want to buy my first brand new car, just buy it all in cash, aint make no deals. Buy my first house and probably marriage. I want to have kids before I hit 35, go ahead and have them and get it out of the way. I also want to go to Las Vegas and have a lot of money so I aint work no more. You make all that money you aint gotta work.

The greatest lessons he learned from RPP included “how to save my money up, how to communicate with other people, how to speak clearly with other people, job fairs, meeting new people. He said, “They taught me to be confident in myself and not be scared to talk to people. Talk clear and they can hear you better… Mmm Hmm. RPP made my life way more better for me. Made the world way more better for me.” He gave an example of how far his communication skills have come compared to high school. He said, “I was shy in high school and middle school and never talked to people. People would hear me talk and say, ‘what you say’…how I talk made me never talk to people for real. Kept to myself.”

**Fisher**

Fisher is a 28-year-old white male who graduated in 2010. He lives with his mother and father and works full-time on campus for the department of grounds and facilities. This participant has an intellectual disability, but functions higher cognitively compared to other participants. He cuts grass, uses a weed eater, drives around campus, and performs other maintenance tasks on campus. This participant has his driver’s license and owns his own car. He has a slight speech impairment that affected his ability to enunciate some syllables.
Therefore, during the interview, he had a tendency to answer with “I don’t know” often. I got the impression that for some of the questions he did not want to think very hard and it was easier to respond than to sit back and ponder the answer. Fisher never really gravitated towards the other students in more than a helper role. Additionally, his intellectual disability was evidenced in his inability to understand interview questions that his peers did understand. He instead gravitated more towards the mentors, volunteers, and staff for friendship. He was high functioning compared to most while enrolled, so he tended to assume a helper type role more than other students. Unlike the other participants who had attended public schools prior to enrolled in RPP, this participant’s previous schooling was in private schools where he was enrolled in inclusive classrooms. His memories of his school experiences were not unlike participant Jana who was bullied. Fisher appreciated RPP because the teachers pushed me, they expected 100% out of me every day, they make you do your work...It was good, it helped me. They wanted more than my [private school] teacher before did...I used to get bullied and made fun in elementary school. I quit wearing glasses because of that. The teachers helped me with the lessons they taught me and the job sites helped me learn.

Fisher is from an above average socioeconomic status when compared to the other eight participants in the study. Many of his answers to the different questions were the same response reworded and had a tendency to be terse.

**Employment.** Specifically, specifying with regard to employment, he stated that RPP “helped me get a job and go out there and be accountable. It helped me have different jobs on campus and with job skills. It was good to help me in life and help me at my jobsite and different things.” When asked what that same situation would look like without having attended the program, he said, “I would probably get a job that I didn’t like in a restaurant.” I asked him if he thought he would have a job overall to which he responded, “Maybe, maybe not.”
Independent living. When I asked what independent living skills he attributed to RPP, he said,

Accountability, skills, the teachers just helped me through it. How to manage my money, don’t spend it, save and look at my bank account…Get through life, cook food, buys groceries, washes my clothes, pay the bills, I pay for my car though; just got a new Jeep Grand Cherokee.

I followed up by asking if he could do all of that without having gone through RPP to which he responded, “I don’t know. I would just be sitting at home.”

Social realm. Fisher shared a similar sentiment to the rest of the participants when asked about being in a class with other students that had disabilities. He said, “It just helped me talk to other people and make friends with them. I could relax and be myself and no one made fun of me. Everyone had a disability…Without going to RPP I would be sad. I would just sit on the couch all day.” His future aspirations were to get a girlfriend and live “in my family’s cabin on my own.” He also wanted to continue working for the university where he is currently employed. Although he does not live alone, Fisher expressed that he believed RPP gave him the necessary skills to do so in the future. When asked whether or not he preferred to be in a class with others that had intellectual disabilities, he responded, “yes.” Regarding the overall effect of RPP on his life, he said, “It helped me.”

Macey

Macey is a 21-year-old white female who graduated from RiverPass in 2017. She works part-time for the local parks and recreation department serving as a child care professional. At her job, her primary responsibility is looking after children in a daycare setting. She lives with her mother, father, and sister in a rural area. From her first to third year, I witnessed the transformation of this young woman from a quiet, shy, and introverted person with an intellectual disability into the lead role in the RPP dinner theater presentation of *Alice in*
Where she performed in front of 300 people. She has an intellectual disability and autism. This participant has very clear communication skills, although very quiet and introverted, and is one of the highest functioning adults in this study. Her narrative about her disability was heart wrenching. She spoke at length about how she was misdiagnosed for years and her take on teachers in her public school.

Learning Disability, Intellectual Disability, Mental Retardation, Like everything. I think of things in my head and they sound right, but when it comes out it’s like woooooo that was not what I wanted to say, not what I wanted it to come out as. Like talking wise it doesn’t go away.

I went to tons of doctors. Indian Rivers, they are supposed to be specialists. My brother went there too because he was not learning. He was bouncing off the walls, not listening, rambunctious, he’s just crazy. They talked to my mom about me being behind academically and that there might be something wrong with me to why I am not learning basic things that I should be learning for my age and so I went to Indian Rivers and my brother got diagnosed with ADHD and then they tried to diagnose me. First it was autism, they asked me questions and it was hard because I was like I don’t really know the answer or they wouldn’t give me enough time to answer. So first I was diagnosed with autism and then after that I was diagnosed with ADHD and ADD on top of that. They wanted to put me on medicine and my mom was like my daughter is not ADD or ADHD you’re crazy. Autistic probably but not all! I went to another place, but I can’t remember the name and did lots of other tests with her. Just basic things like do you know this is a square, this is a circle, triangle, do you know how to add, multiply subtract just basic stuff. Then I did a test on a computer then they sent a thing home to my mom about me having a learning disability and that’s what my diagnosis was from that doctor. It was moderate. Moderate autism and learning disability. I was in the second or third grade.

Like in my experience teachers in high school and middle school are like whatever, if you don’t wanna learn and don’t wanna do this you are slow and you are stupid, you are a moron and you are lazy. That was just their demeanor, the way they approached things. Like I don’t care about you, you have a learning disability, I would rather worry about this normal kid over here more better than you. I noticed and experienced that in school.

At this point, she broke down and started to cry.

**Employment.** When asked about her employment experiences at RPP she said, “I didn’t think before RPP that I could hold down a job. I learned how to listen and talk to a boss. It
helped me be used to being around people.” When discussing her life without RPP in the area of employment, she responded,

It would’ve been bad. Really bad. You know how shy and awkward I am and I have to work with people day in a day out. That would be really hard for me if I didn’t have the social skills and job experiences I learned. I wouldn’t have a job without RPP.

She credited the RPP with her ability to manage time and job tasks. During this conversation, she walked me through part of her workday,

…wake up, get my stuff ready, we take my sister to work too, my dad takes me to work, we drop her off then me, we wait until 7:30, jump out of the car, go inside, get the hour book, put my hours in, go downstairs in the mornings, upstairs is usually in the afternoon, go downstairs, get the sheet that the parents sign, put the time and the day on the sheet, and wait for children to come.

Independent living. I asked what she learned in the independent living courses at RPP; the invariant statement that captured the essence of what she had to say was as follows:

How to budget and manage money, cooking, change batteries, change light bulbs, use tools, when to go to a doctor, how to go to the doctor, how to write checks, how to talk to a pharmacist. Learning to write a check and pay for bills, important labels on bottles and medicine, drug dosing, knowing how to set up doctor appointments and when you should or should not go to the doctor.

Macey expressed she and her family help each other out at home and with money management, “like if I help pay bills and don’t have any money they will like help me like get groceries for next week for work or stuff like that.” These higher order processes show not only her potential, but that her cognitive functioning is higher than most of the other participants in this study and RPP at large. This led into me asking what her independent living knowledge level would be without RPP to which she replied, “I don't know how to explain it. It would just be plain. It would be worse.” The conversation shifted to the concepts of age and maturity through the RPP. She added, “I don’t know, it’s more like age wise I have grown up a lot. I’m not like the I don’t care about this and I don’t care about that rebel child. Now I’m more like settle down adult and
do responsibilities and have responsibilities.” Macey expressed her own confidence to live
without her family, but also admitted her parents have a lack of faith in her independence.

She's like I can’t wait for you to get to live on your own and then she changes her mind. I
tell her I am ready to get a camper or trailer and that’s what I want to do and then she is
like no you don’t need to do that because rent is too much and you’ll have to have a
roommate live with you. I’m like yes I know but still I want to do that. That’s what I
want. So I don’t try to backtalk. Yeah. I just don’t argue with her. I just say yes ma’am
and go about my business. I don’t say what! What was that!

Social realm. Having witnessed her social growth, I asked what she attributed to RPP in
the social realm. She said,

We had guy’s and girl’s days on Fridays, stuff with PARA, dinner theater, it was all
fun. I was so shy and awkward before RPP.” “It affected me intellectually wise and job
wise, I can’t really explain it. It helped me get out and stuff. Before I was the shy in
the shell person not talking to anyone or anything, and now I’m whoa everywhere and talk to
people. I am not like as shy as I used to be. Because you got to see different people with
different disabilities and make good friends with them.” “Mmmm hmmm, oh yeah, I
worked my butt off. Especially for the graduation speeches and for learning the lines to
Alice In Wonderland I had to study a ton. I had to make myself work all the time and
had pressure on me. 93 lines is a lot.” This was how to remembered the play and my role
in it. We did a play at RPP and I was Alice. It was fuuuuuuuuuuuun! It was my first
time being on stage and in front of an audience. It was a huge like leap from a tiny
practice show to on a stage in front of more than 240 people. I didn’t know that
until someone told me you just performed in front of more than 240 people. I was like
WHATTTTTTTTTT? I’m glad they told me after and not before. It was a huge step for
me.

She delved into a long monologue about her social outcomes almost as though I was not there.

At RiverPass I learned so much socially. I probably wouldn’t be able to talk to people
because like this is how bad I didn’t want to talk to people when I was in kindergarten.
Like this is how bad it was: I didn’t talk to anyone else, not even my own teacher. They
thought maybe I was a mute. Or I just didn’t or wasn’t smart enough to talk. I just didn’t
want to talk. I didn’t want to talk to you I didn’t want to get to know you I was in a
different environment. I was trying to study and look at everything and try to figure
where I’m at and get used to things and then socially I think it would have been very
different. I wouldn’t be able to talk to people at all. I wouldn’t even talk to people that
would actually come up to me and say something to me. I would completely ignore them
and like block them out because I didn’t know what to say. Even if I did know
something to say I felt awkward and weird because it came out wrong the way I said
it. Like I didn’t mean to say that, but that’s how it came out.
I followed this up with how her life would be socially without RPP to which she replied, “I would not have been in a play. Lonely mostly... Without it I would be sitting at home doing nothing. No job and nothing to do. Going to RPP was the best decision I have ever made.”

When reminiscing about her growth through her school years, she said,

In high school I didn’t have much friends because of drama, I stayed away from people who carried drama. I was like I’m gonna stay by myself and not gonna associate with anyone but myself and my teachers. And then when I came to RPP I actually got to talk to people who weren’t gonna start drama or who actually have like intellectual disabilities or autism. Just someone who had disability that you could talk to.

Toward the end of the interview, Macey theorized about her future relationships,

It would be pretty cool to find someone with a disability like me, but normal people that’s fine. It’s just trying to explain to them hey I have a learning disability it’s kinda hard to come out with that. Some people are like oh my gosh no I don’t want to date someone who has a disability.

Cohen

Cohen is a 30-year-old white male with down syndrome. He graduated from RiverPass in 2008. He has continued his education by attending a college summer program offered at RiverPass. Cohen works on campus at the medical center where he is a lab runner. His responsibilities include delivering urine and blood samples for testing. He takes public transportation to and from work. He has speech and cognitive impairments that affected his understanding of many of the interview questions. I would often rephrase questions in order to get answers. His answers had tendencies to be shorter than the other participants in the study.

Part of the interview protocol was to discuss the participant’s disabilities. In doing this, Cohen responded, “no not really it kinda bothers me, I never wanted to be down syndrome. I wanted to be a regular.” Due to his disability and lack of thorough answers, I had to read cues, emotion, and nonverbal communication during his interviews. I could tell throughout both sessions that he was very grateful for the RPP program and the experiences he had there but was frustrated in
his lack of ability to convey this through conversation. He attributed his successes in the three pillars of Halpern’s model exclusively to the RPP but struggled with the words and communication skills needed to put forth this message. In addition, this is oldest participant in the study and had a tough time remembering many of the specific experiences at RPP. Cohen’s story is unique because after the passing of his parents, his grandmother decided to move from far away specifically for him to have a chance to attend the RPP. The losses that he experienced prior to this move were significant by any measure and undoubtedly took a toll on the family. The specifics of the family history will be intentionally left out for privacy sake. Although he used to live with his grandmother while a student at RPP, he recently purchased his own home and lives by himself. This was the only homeowner in this study.

**Employment.** When asked how the RPP affected his employment outcomes in life, he responded, “RPP helped me to get my job and get to work on campus.” He estimated without the RPP, “I might still have a job, but not as good.” The RPP made the connections necessary for him to obtain his current job.

**Independent living.** Cohen now lives on his own due to knowledge he acquired at RPP. He is an example of how normative outcomes of students with disabilities can be defied through transition education. He said, “It helped me learn how to live by myself and buy my own house. It felt great. I owe a lot to RPP. I wouldn’t know how to do stuff for myself.”

**Social realm.** Cohen credits the program with providing him with the opportunity to meet his best friends. He said, “I learned how to make lots of friends, my best friends.” “I wouldn’t have as many friends and wouldn’t be as happy.” Cohen’s future aspirations include the following: “I want to make movies in Hollywood and be rich and powerful. Hollywood has always been my biggest dream. It’s kinda hard for me to imagine the future. I’m not sure if I
will be married.” Cohen has a long-term girlfriend who also was a graduate of RPP. They met while students in the program. Overall, Cohen made the following invariant statements about RPP regarding the entire experience: “It affected my life really well;” “It changed my life;” “It taught me how to do all kinds of good stuff” and “At first I didn’t know how to do, but now I do. Jobs, living skills, and friends.”

Collective Themes

In this section, I present the collective themes which emerged by examining the textural/individual’s themes or invariant statements that resulted from the individual participant’s descriptions their post-school outcomes and how and what they attributed to RPP. Thus, these collective themes form the essence of the RPP based upon the collective descriptions of the participants.

Employment

Skills for employment. This theme speaks to the essence of the RPP as described by participants who gave examples of specific skills they learned and attributed to the participating in RPP. For instance, Jeremy stated he learned how to clean up, wipe stuff down, shred paper, work with other people, and put books in the right place. Likewise, Parker mentioned he gained experience in different areas of work like cleaning, dusting, mopping, taking out the trash, and other skills. Jana mentioned the importance of her having an adapted jobsite due to her lack of mobility and how that experience helped her gain job skills while exploring what was realistic for her. Cohen mentioned how the RPP helped him get his current job on campus and Macey mentioned how valuable her experiences of learning to talk to a boss were. Fisher said the job skill of accountability was something he learned at RPP. Each of the participants described the
vast array of skills they acquired and honed by attending RPP and the job experience helped them either directly or indirectly obtain employment.

**Perception as employable.** The primary message behind this theme is graduates from the program saw themselves as employable, even if they are not currently employed, due to the RPP. Many participants explicitly stated they did not see themselves as having job options without RPP and even if they did not have one, it was at least an option. They theorized that without RPP, their lives with respect to employment would be very different. Two female participants come to mind here, as they are both currently unemployed, but both believe they are capable of getting and holding a job due to the RPP program fostering their own self-perceptions about being employed. Andrea talked about the importance of being on time and without RPP, she would not have the ability to get a job. This implied her experiences at RPP included the process of finding and applying for an occupation, not just the skill sets involved once hired. Kirsten discussed the creation of a resume and its importance when looking for a job. She also talked about how proper interview etiquette is important to the process of obtaining a job. Jana discussed how having an adaptive job site showed her that she was capable of working even though she has both physical and intellectual disabilities. She went on to say she would not have her current university job was it not for RPP. Both Cohen and Fisher echoed the sentiment that they likely would both have jobs; just not jobs as good as the ones they currently have if not for RPP. Macey stated before RPP she did not think a job was possible for her at all.

**Independent Living**

**Being able.** One of the themes which points toward the essence of RPP is participants saw themselves as far more capable than they had previously thought. They realized they needed less help than initially believed and that the RPP boosted their own limits to what was possible in
the area of independent living. Jana mentioned how her house is not accessible. She learned how to make the best of a bad situation and stated that RPP taught me how to hold herself to higher standards. When asked about what her living situation at home would be like without the RPP, she explained that it is all about mentality. Jana said without RPP she would not be able to do anything at all including getting out of her wheelchair, showering, or even going to the bathroom by herself.

**Family and others' perceptions of abilities.** Participants were quick to show family and friends that they were capable of more than was expected of them because of what they learned at RPP. Some participants had family members with low expectations of their independent living skills and welcomed the opportunity to prove them wrong. Macey discussed how she was proud to show her mom all of the independent skills she was capable of. She went on to say how she sees her daughter as more significantly disabled than she sees herself. Jana shared a similar sentiment when proving to her grandmother all that she is capable of. She discussed how her grandmother shelters her and how she proves her grandmother wrong regularly with what she is capable of doing in the house.

**Desire for independence.** Every participant in this study expressed that without the RPP, they would not have the option to live on their own due to lack of skills and understanding. Although many do not live on their own, the options and ability to do so was something considered unreachable prior to attending RPP. Macey discussed that she has had conversations with her mother about moving into an apartment or in a nearby trailer, and, although her mother does not think she is ready, Macey credits RPP with giving her the knowledge and skills to be able to make the move confidently. Cohen, the only homeowner in the study, said how it feels good to have his own place and without RPP, this would have never happened. Jeremy and
Andrea did live on their own prior to their son being born, and, although they moved back in with his mother to help with the baby, that they credited RPP with giving them the skills to be able to live by themselves. They discussed how they enjoyed their time alone and wish to move out again soon.

**Social Realm**

**Do what others would never be allowed to do.** The opportunities afforded to RPP students that had never been options before were numerous. These experiences entailed things society generally does not allow people with intellectual disabilities to do. This included going to college on a university campus, presenting at academic conferences, and starting a college student organization. While discussing the social realm and the opportunities that RPP offered, Jana talked about founding a student organization on campus from connections she made while a student. She also discussed presenting at multiple conferences and how that would not have been possible were it not for RPP. When asked what it was like to go to school and work on a university campus, Kirsten said being on campus made her feel like a real college student and that felt good.

**Participate in novel experiences.** In addition to the employment and independent living aspects of RPP, participants expressed multiple experiences that they had the opportunity to partake in while enrolled. Many of these experiences would not have taken place for them without facilitation by the RPP program. Jana expressed gratitude for all the things she got to do with PARA, the local parks and recreation department. Jeremy talked about enjoying the dances, dinner and movies, bowling, and Shakespeare festival. The traveling opportunities made possible by PARA were highlights for participant Jeremy’s experience at RPP. When discussing
the social realm with Macey, she stated that she liked *girls’ days* on Fridays, stuff with PARA, dinner theater, and that it was all fun.

**Authentic friendships and relationships.** Multiple participants claimed they met their best friends at RPP or through various connections the program has with other organizations. Student mentors and best buddies were two groups mentioned which connect RPP students to other students on campus both with and without intellectual disabilities. Kirsten, Andrea, Andrew, and Jeremy are all best friends and met while attending the RPP program. Furthermore, Andrea and Jeremy got married after meeting at RPP. Cohen and his group of friends in the program called themselves the “downers” due to all of them having down syndrome. Jana said she met almost all of her best friends through the program in some way. Throughout the interviews, she often said many aspects of her life were dependent on connections she made at RPP and heavily reliant on the social aspect of transition.

**Teachers’ perceptions.** Participants claimed the teachers at RPP pushed them more than any other teachers ever had. They consistently stated the RPP teachers were the first ones that had ever really believed in them. Jana proclaimed that the teachers helped her a lot. She said they what was best for her. Kirsten mentioned the teachers took their time to teach her correctly, something previous teachers had not done. Fisher stated the teachers expected 100% out of him every day; they made him do his work.

**High standards.** The RPP made students accountable for themselves and strived for them to perform at a high level compared to what they were used to. Much was expected of them from the program in conjunction with the faculty and staff. Jana echoed this sentiment claiming RPP taught her how to hold myself to higher standards. The opinion shared by Macey that RPP cared and expected more than her other schools was evident by her word choice.
Unexpected Findings

Each student, in their own parallel narrative, estimated what their lives would be like without the RPP. This turned out to be one of the most compelling parts of the project for me as I had no conception of their views of life without RPP. Alternate futures such as prison and suicide were evident in the responses. As the investigator in this project, I was taken back by how real and moving the participant responses were. This is where I truly witnessed the effect RPP has in a polarizing way. I will now include some of the statements in regard to life without the RPP. Jana stated,

> Without RPP I wouldn’t be at all. I would be dead. Through RPP my life has opened up in so many ways. It’s a game changer, a world changer. RPP is an opportunity that is potentially lifesaving.

Andrew stated that his future would have been quite different too. He said,

> So I told myself that I wasn't going to do that. I wasn't going to do no drugs. I thought about it. They have to pay for the drugs and get the drugs to sell the drugs and using their money too. I said I don't want to do that. I would end up with some time. Yeah family members and my dad are in there. My dad is locked up for selling drugs. I visited him in prison a few times. I learned from that. Yeah. Never going back. I got out of trouble a couple times, but the first time I really got caught I got scared. My dad in Huntsville prison knows some killers in there. I said to myself I ain’t going there. I learned enough just from the pat down to visit and I wasn't even doing a bid. Dad told me "I'm gonna see you in here one day". I said no you ain't! Without RPP I would be in prison, doing that bad stuff for real.

I found it ironic that although many educators and policy makers are consistently pushing for inclusion, the people it affects most do not want it, at least not this specific population. Many of the participants in the project claimed for the first time in their lives they could truly be themselves because they were in a classroom of people similar to themselves. Participants said they were either in an inclusive classroom where they could not keep up and were singled out because of the teacher aides that were constantly with them or that they were in a secluded classroom, but with much lower functioning students they could not relate to or interact with.
Instead, they preferred a classroom setting like RPP which is technically secluded but with students of their same age and generally a similar ability level. Fisher said how RPP helped him to talk to other people and make friends with them. He stated he could relax and be himself and no one made fun of him at RPP. Everyone had a disability he said. Andrea proclaimed that she enjoyed classes at RPP because everyone was like her, meaning everyone had a disability and was in a similar situation. Parker stated it made it possible for him to be himself when he realized everyone had a disability.

Summary

I have struggled in this study to distill such a complex program and complexed individuals into an essence, as required by the phenomenological method. However, the further I have gotten into this study and into my data analysis specifically, I have been able to separate what the core and foundational essence is from interesting thoughts or portions better suited for the fifth chapter of this project. Things I find interesting or even common responses given by the participants in this study are not to be discounted, but many of these commonalities will be better suited for discussion in the next chapter. The essence of the RiverPass program is only something that can come from the graduates of the program itself and not someone who simply works there. After all, the entire goal of epoche is to remove myself from the equation. Therefore, the essence of the RiverPass program is that it affects the lives of adults with intellectual disabilities in real and tangible ways which can only be discovered through dialogue with those graduates who have been through the program. When sitting and conversing with the participants of this study, it was profoundly clear each of their lives had benefitted from the program. Furthermore, without the program, their lives would have ended up in very different places with different results. Fortunately, they did attend the program and they would argue it is
an inherently good thing they did. The participants would argue without the RiverPass program, their lives would not be successful, happy, or fulfilled. Of that I am completely confident. The skills, information, and experiences they have garnered through the RiverPass program have led them to be positively affected in the social realm, the employment realm, and the independent realm of transition.
CHAPTER V:
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Findings

This chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the findings of this study as well as conclusions and implications for policy, practice, and further research. First, the chapter begins by revisiting the purpose of the study, research questions, and how those research questions were answered in this study. The discussion of those findings is aligned with the research questions that guided this study. Further, those findings are framed in light of the relevant literature in the field as reviewed in Chapter II of this dissertation. Secondly, the limitations and parameters of the study are discussed and, finally, directions for future research presented.

This project investigated how the RiverPass Program has impacted the lives of the students that attended it. The interviews increased my understanding to the different ways this program altered the paths of students for the better. Every student commented not only did the program make them happier than they had previously been, but also described life without RiverPass and how drastically different it would be. This turned out to be the most profound aspect to me. The program has made connections for graduates in the form of jobs, friends, different living scenarios and has nurtured young men and women to achieve more than their peers with intellectual disabilities.

In the study, I conducted in depth interviews of graduates of the RiverPass program to determine the extent to which they attribute, if at all, their post-school outcomes to the transition preparation they received in the program. Follow-up interviews were conducted with each
participant based upon their responses to the initial in-depth interview. In selecting the participants, I used purposive sampling focusing on specific factors, attributes, and variables identified in previous studies as predictive of post-school outcomes to determine who to include in the project. Some of these factors include gender, race, disability, age, graduation year, and job status. The study took place at a flagship public university in the southeastern United States that is a fully-accredited institution. The participants were adults with intellectual disabilities who have graduated from the RiverPass program. These participants are all transition program graduates from past fourteen years. Their ages were between 22 and 35.

**Research Question**

Specifically drawing upon narratives of a purposively selected sample of RiverPass program graduates, this study interrogated their attributions of achieving IDEA-defined post-school outcomes in areas of employment, independent living, and the social realm. Each of these is framed within Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model. Halpern argued programs needed to address each of these pillars in order to impact the quality of life of students with disabilities. He thought transition was much more than a school simply handing a student to the next person or service provider. His model was very influential in the adoption of IDEA 1990 and expanded to form the current conception of post-school outcomes in the IDEA 2004. I will address each of the three pillars and connect how the findings address each inquiry. Following the discussion of the research questions, I will address how these findings relate back to the literature.

**Employment**

What do graduates attribute to RiverPass experiences in their postschool outcome area of employment? RPP graduates attributed their employment outcomes to their experiences in the program and the job skills training they received. Even the graduates who were not currently
employed believed they had the training and ability to gain and keep employment because of what they experienced and learned at RPP. Most of the participants were currently employed and verbalized a debt of gratitude to the RPP for instilling the skills and expertise in them to obtain and hold these positions. Of the seven participants currently employed, only two thought they would still have some sort of job without having attended RPP, but they both thought those jobs would not be as good as the ones they had during interviews. Five of the employed participants stated they would not have jobs at all without having gone to RPP. The examples they gave were not only of the specific ways they obtained these skills in ways such as job site experiences, job coaching, and occupational social skills, but also the prediction of their lack of these skills without the program. Participants were thankful for what they were able to accomplish because of the RPP program and this was common throughout each interview. For example, when asked about how RPP effected his employment situation, Parker stated, “The RPP helped me get my job, job training, and helped me to get where I'm at now and gave me lots of experience in different areas of work like cleaning, dusting, mopping, taking out the trash and other stuff. Without RPP, I probably wouldn’t have a job.”

In the parallel life part of the interviews, participants expressed not knowing how to talk with bosses and coworkers, lack of time management, lack of accountability, and lack of practical job skills as detrimental to their occupational futures without the experiences at RPP. Participants also stated they obtained their current jobs through connections made at RPP or directly through the program itself and how it would have been impossible to get these jobs without RPP. Furthermore, being on a university campus put them at the epicenter of a considerable job market and large-scale employer. Six of them took advantage of this and currently work on campus in some capacity. Seven of the participants landed jobs while still
students at RPP, which made them much more likely to have an occupation the following year as mentioned below. The participant has since changed jobs credited the RPP for his ability to navigate the process of seamlessly moving from one job to a better one and the processes involved with it. In his particular case, he moved from a part-time position without benefits to a full-time position with benefits; including health insurance and a retirement package. He mentioned liking his old job at a golf course better, but knowing a full-time job with the facilities department that included benefits and better pay was a much smarter decision overall because of what he learned at RPP. This is unusual for someone with an intellectual disability as occupational mobility is not usually a trait associated with this population. There is a tendency for adults with intellectual disabilities to hold on to a job even if they are not happy with it as opposed to adults without disabilities who usually try to find another position.

According to data from the Alabama Transition Initiative, males were 2.3 times more likely to be employed than females. Students who had a job when they graduated were 5.1 times more likely to have a job one year after school than those who did not have a job when graduating. And overall, the odds of a male having a job one year after graduating were higher than female’s in every demographic situation (Rabren, Dunn, & Chambers, 2002). Every one of these statistics was confirmed in my study. Of the nine participants, only two were unemployed and both were female. This equates to 78% of the participants in my study being employed, which reflects a similar proportional percentage to all graduates of RPP. Compared to the NLTS-2’s rate of 54% of participants having a job within the past year, although not necessarily having a current job, the RPP graduates have a higher employment rate than the national average for their peers with intellectual disabilities. The NLTS-2 claimed at any given point during the year, only 22% of participants were employed, which is 56% less than the RPP graduates in this
study. When comparing these statistics, RPP has a significantly higher post-school employment rate compared to the national average. The males in this study had a 100% employment rate. This is higher than the overall population of RPP graduates, but impressive nonetheless compared to adults both with and without disabilities nationally (Wagner et al., 2005). The NLTS-2’s claimed overall employment rates of 62% for white students and 42% for African-American students were both surpassed by the participants in this project, as well as the job placement percentage for RPP graduates overall at the time of program completion. Due to employment being the centerpiece of the transition experience and a hallmark of independence and maturity for all young adults, it is the one pillar in Halpern’s model that has literature to back it up. Other contemporary transition models put more weight in the employment aspect than other parts of transition.

Skills for Employment

The participants in this project consistently stated the experiences they had at jobsites and how they acquired communication skills, cleaning skills, office skills, time management, and experiences and skills relevant to successful employment, amongst other things. The typical RPP student is in the program for three years and has a new job internship site every semester, so in theory the student graduates with employment experience gleaned from six different job sites that have their own unique qualities. Students attributed their current successes in employment to what they learned at RPP and repeatedly suggested that were it not for the RPP, they would not be employed today.

Seeing Myself as Employable

The program graduates in this study entered RPP without realizing they were employable at all. They had been told earlier in their lives that they would not be able to get a job, which set
their career expectations very low if they had any at all. The self-visualization after gaining some job experience turned from unemployable to employable for the participants. One participant in particular comes to mind because she had zero expectations of ever having a job due to her using a wheelchair. When she realized not only could she perform job tasks, but that many of the job site positions could be adapted for wheelchair use, she began to see herself as part of the workforce and started believing in herself. She said, “Through the RPP I got lots of job experience. I had the chance to have accessible job sites for the first time in my life. Due to my physical limitations, the program helped me find my interests and what was realistic.” Similar sentiment echoed through the experiences of each participant in this study when they realized they were capable of having a job.

**Independent Living**

What do graduates attribute to RiverPass experiences in their post-school outcome area of independent living? Participants’ responses indicated they acquired new independent living skills while enrolled at RPP that they previously did not possess. They expressed the importance of learning these skills in order to one day live independently from parents or guardians. Although most do not currently live on their own, the participants expressed confidence that due to the program, they will be able to successfully live independently. One participant in the study, who has down syndrome, does live on his own and purchased his home on his own. This is such a non-normative outcome that very little literature exists on this topic. To say that he defied societal norms is an understatement. The NLTS-2 reports white males are more likely than African-American males to live independently after high school, but there is no indication about specific disability or home ownership. In their parallel narratives, participants indicated living independently was never going to be an option without the RPP. They went further to say RPP
equipped them with the knowledge and skills necessary to pay bills, cook, clean, manage money, take public transportation or learn how to drive, take care of their personal hygiene and health, and schedule doctor visits. The participants also explained the aspect of realistically assessing what type of living environment would be best suited for them.

It’s All about Mentality

The participants were able to see themselves as RPP saw them, as able. One participant said,

It’s all about mentality. Without RPP I wouldn’t be able to do anything at all. Not even get out of my wheelchair, shower, or go to the bathroom. I didn’t want to learn how to go to the bathroom by myself because I thought what’s the point, I’m never going to do anything in life, then a lightbulb went off and I realized what I had been missing, then things started getting better.

The RPP program viewed the program graduates is a different way than they had been seen before; as able. Just because they had a disability did not mean they were not capable of performing independent living tasks. Sure, they may need more help than someone who does not have a disability, but since everyone in the program has one, they could all support and learn from one another. This contributed to participants having similar self-revelations that they had in the employment arena. They realized, “Hey, I can do this!” Cooking, cleaning, shopping, money management, and getting a driver’s license were all things they could do very little of before RPP and now are self-reliant in these areas.

Family and Others’ Perceptions

Showing friends and family what they were capable of was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Whether cooking from a recipe, making a shopping list, or managing money, students were eager to show newly acquired skills and knowledge off to their friends and family. This happened multiple times to a participant that uses a wheelchair and lives in an inaccessible
home. Although there are parts of her home not accessible to her, she was excited to show her grandmother a newly acquired skill or ability she had been practicing in the classroom.

**Desire to Live on One’s Own**

The realization of capability for being independent was a powerful feeling to the participants in this study. For students who had never imagined the possibility of living on their own, coming to terms with the fact that it was becoming an option made them realize how capable they were. Participants felt even if they did not currently live on their own, RPP gave them the skillset to make a choice. Drawing from the parallel narratives of life without RPP, this would never have been contemplated, much less considered a viable option. One participant said, “Something just clicked for me. I really look forward to when I can support myself in my own apartment with minimal help. RPP helped open my eyes to the possibility of living on my own.”

**Social Realm**

What do graduates attribute to RiverPass experiences in their post-school outcome area of the social realm? The social realm findings from this study were interesting because unlike the employment data, many of the findings did not follow the national picture put forth in the NLTS-2. According to the NLTS-2, 65% of participants indicated they rarely or never received phone communications from friends. Perhaps this is due to the growing prevalence of phones and the internet, but participants in this study indicated they communicated electronically with friends very often, if not every day. The NLTS-2 indicated 65% of respondents participated in group activities during the past year with 46% being at school and 49% being in the community in which they live. Perhaps RPP has an advantage being on a college campus, but 100% of the participants participated in group social activities while enrolled in the program. At least half of the participants in the study still participate in group activities, although these vary greatly and
are not necessarily based around an organization or exclusively for those with intellectual
disabilities. The variability in the participation rates was reflective of the participants' interests
and preferences rather than an absence of opportunity. While in the program, they had sampled
different types of social and recreational activities from Rockwall climbing, canoeing to dinner
and a movie and dances to the extent that they had a very clear idea of what social and
recreational activities interested them thus they pursued those of interest. The findings from my
study suggested males were more likely to be involved in sports as a social activity than their
female peers, which aligns with the findings of NLTS-2. Program graduates expressed how
important the social aspect of RPP was to them. They had made friends, met romantic partners,
and even spouses while enrolled in the program. Being on a college campus with same-age
peers without disabilities was an important factor to the participants in this study. The
participants all stated how much they enjoyed the social activities with PARA which included
field trips, fraternity house days (Guys’ Day) or Girls’ Day at a sorority house, shopping trips,
factory tours, travel, dinner and movie nights, fishing trips, canoeing, and conferences they
would not have been able to experience without RPP. The individuals in the study also touched
on concepts of loneliness, bullying, and depression when speaking about their parallel lives
without RPP.

**Do What Others Would Never Be Allowed to Do**

Historically, spaces like college campuses were not places open to people with
intellectual disabilities. The sense of belonging was recurring when participants spoke about
being on a university campus. This theme really shines through when considering six of the nine
participants in this study currently work on campus due to connections made while they were
students at RPP.
Participate in Novel Experiences

The theme of social activities and recreation was mentioned by each and every participant. PARA, the local parks and recreation service, partners with RPP regularly to facilitate students taking part in field trips, fishing trips, tours, movie nights, and even trips out of the city and state. Many students experienced these things for the first time and mentioned that without these trips, they would have never left the city where RPP is located, much less tried out some of those novel activities.

Authentic Friendships and Relationships

The theme of friendships and relationships shown through the interviews with each participant. They expressed the value of having friends, meeting their spouse, and forging bonds with their best friends. Without RPP, participants indicated they thought they would not have any friends and would be lonely and depressed. The social aspects of being on a college campus and building relationships with people from all walks of life was important and led to jobs, friendships, and professional working relationships. Indeed, these findings are not dissimilar to what happens with typical college students who meet friends, make professional connections and sometimes even find their future life partners in college (Wagner et al., 2005). What makes these findings noteworthy is how rare that is for persons with intellectual disabilities whose adult lives are rife with images of isolation and loneliness (Flexer et al., 2013).

Teachers’ Perceptions

It was clear to me in the interviews many students had been given up on by previous teachers in their lives. I heard multiple cases of teachers not caring, labeling students broken, and expressing a general apathy about the future of those students. This was not the case when they came to RPP. The teachers took an interest in their success and many had, for the first time,
educators who cared about them. The teachers, through their confidence in the students, built the confidence in the students themselves.

**High Standards**

Through the confidence mentioned above, teachers expected much from the students and in turn, made the students expect much from themselves. The self-worth and standards adopted by students saw their self-esteem, goals, and quality of life increase. Students noted that what they have achieved and relationships they have built came due to them pushing themselves to be better versions of themselves. The RPP expected more from them than any school ever had before.

**Lack of Qualitative Transition Literature**

It is important to address the considerable lack of transition literature available. Although special education is a well-established field with much research, transition education itself is a relatively new concept. Furthermore, postsecondary transition research is even more limited by its newness to academia. Historically, the majority of special education research is overwhelmingly quantitative in nature and lacks the descriptive narratives that tell the complete stories of students with intellectual disabilities. These narratives cannot be quantified to include the richness and texture present within the stories. The research that does exist on postsecondary transition tends to focus on employment more than anything and lacks in the areas of independent living and the social realm.

**Findings Related to the Literature**

With five of the nine participants in this study being male, this coincides with the NLTS-2 findings that the majority of transition students are male. The NLTS-2 gender gap between participants was significant with 67% being male. NLTS-2 cited multiple studies (Hebbeler et
al., 2001; Wagner et al., 2002) with similar results of having a majority of students with disabilities being male. Although a purposeful sampling technique was used when considering candidates, the ratio of males to females that have completed the RPP is in line with the NLTS-2 findings. The majority of RPP program graduates since the program’s inception have been African-American, which confirms the NLTS-2 findings that African-Americans occupy a higher percentage of those with intellectual disabilities at 33% compared to the general population.

Conclusions

Transition education is emerging as a prevalent option for students with intellectual disabilities and can provide information and skills to help them achieve more than previously expected historically. The areas of employment, independent living, and social life are all focused on by both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Halpern’s Community Adjustment Model. The RiverPass program has been successful in implementing program goals to help students realize and move toward more options than they previously had in their lives.

According to the NLTS-1, Transition students were likely students to be male, poor, African-American, and from single parent households, compared to their nondisabled peers. Although my project did not include any participants without intellectual disabilities, the findings generally correlated with this assumption. The majority of the participants in my study were, in fact, male, African-American, of low socioeconomic status, and from single parent households. Multiple participants lived with their grandparents due to lack of availability of parental involvement. Only two of the nine participants in my study lived with both parents in
the household. Three lived with grandparents and three lived in single parent households. These findings confirm what the NLTS-1 would predict.

Life without RPP for these participants, in their own opinions, would not have turned out as well as they did. Loneliness, depression, prison, and suicide were all either avoided or made bearable by the RPP program. This program has real, positive, and tangible results in ways presented vividly by the participants that graduated from the program. They described how bad life would have been had this program not come into their lives and how the bad, dark, and negative outcomes were avoided for prosperous, positive, and fulfilling ones. While students at RPP, participants met their best friends, future spouses, and made life-long connections that would not have taken place had they not attended the program. Coming from schools where they felt they did not belong, were bullied, given up on by teachers, they were welcomed with open arms to a model program which changed their lives in countless positive ways.

Overall, the RPP has yielded significantly higher post-school outcomes for its graduates compared to the national average. Program graduates attribute these outcomes to the RPP program. Based on normative expectations for adults with intellectual disabilities, the RPP has produced some remarkable results. This is further confirmed by the expectations put forth by the participants regarding their parallel existence without having attended the program.

**Discussion**

In my opinion, it was my prior relationships with the participants that allowed me to gain access into their lives and experiences at RPP. I think these prior relationships created a sense of trust and a sense of comfort between us and I am thankful they were comfortable enough with me to grant me their perspectives. This also created an environment where they could be truthful about what they thought and experienced at RPP and how that played into their post-school lives.
I think I was able to find the information I did because they trusted me enough to talk about some very serious topics laden with emotion. Had I not known the participants previously, the interviews would have not gone as deep and been as thorough. I think this is absolutely a strength of my study. These program graduates have been taught not to talk to strangers for their entire lives and I have witnessed them be silent around those they do not know. This also contributes to the fact that often this population is closed off from research opportunities due to lack of access, especially once the students leave high school. Overall, I think report shared between us was a strength that made this study possible. They knew I was conducting research and this project could help RPP.

This study is important because the information will be used to better the RiverPass program as a whole. The study will also further general education, transition education, disability studies, other transition programs, society, and the participants themselves through having their voices and stories heard. The data gathered will help to lend insight and understanding into what aspects of the program are effective and perhaps what needs to be changed. The study revealed what attributes the students admitted to having an effect on them and how this process occurred. This study also provided a model and information on how to succeed in the context of the transition process. This could be duplicated and used in the future to replicate the RiverPass experience. This has importance because the data could be used elsewhere in the world to help students reach their goals. The overarching purpose of my study was to understand the post school outcomes of graduates of a specialized transition program. Along with demographic factors such as race, gender, job status, and disability, this study addressed the IDEA post-school outcomes. This is significant because clearly RiverPass is a more effective transition program than most others in the country and in the region with regards
to its employment rate after graduation being over eighty percent (Mutua, 2017). The program’s philosophy and implementation has addressed and fulfilled the five main goals as defined by IDEA and could potentially be replicated and looked at as a model program from other similar programs trying to achieve similar results.

The RiverPass Program seems to me to equal more than a simple sum of its parts. Throughout the interviews, participants mentioned multiple times how the teachers were different than others they have previously had. There was a feeling of mutual respect and true caring coming from the participant responses, but what was interesting is that many expressed experiencing this for the first time at RPP. It is a shame that students were either given up on or somehow slipped through the cracks for so many years, that the first empathetic educational experience they had occurred at the ages of 18-21. The setting of being on a college campus is so vastly different than K-12 and the inherent freedom being in such a large environment comes with much accountability. There was almost a sink or swim mentality expressed in the participants views of being on campus and all of them had moments of realizing how capable they were when given some responsibility. When they spoke of being treated like children at their other schools and then being treated like adults at RPP, they credited the teachers with expecting much and thus fostering growth and skill development. It was almost as if they had grown stagnant in their previous schools and were able to grow again when they got to RPP because of the teachers caring and what they expected. I have to give credit where credit is due and applaud the teachers for producing not only such positive outcomes, but for having garnered unanimous positive feedback from the students that graduated the program. The teachers occupy a space that is part special education teacher, part job coach, part K-12 teacher, part college instructor, part administrator, and part counselor for each of the students and it seems to me that
they did an outstanding job. There are two in particular that spent the majority of the program’s existence in teaching positions and based on what their students said, they are some of the best in the field. They surpassed previous expectations and made real tangible changes in students’ lives that allowed them to achieve more than they thought possible.

The inclusion issue that emerged from the interviews was one of the highlights of this project from my perspective. After taking years of classes, reading hundreds of articles, reading dozens of books, and participating in conferences that all dealt with the topic of inclusion, I found it fascinating that all nine of the participants in my project were not proponents of inclusion. The topic of inclusion and desegregating the educational experience is one with a rife history and many political and social issues. Liberal reform and individual rights certainly come into play in this discourse with a progressive stance generally taking hold of the modern trajectory. In special education there seem to be two primary camps when it comes to the topic of inclusion. There are those in favor of inclusion and those that aren’t. When it comes to inclusion and the policy and legislation that push it, I think it is usually done with good intentions. However, those making the decisions rarely, if ever, have an intellectual disability that makes them subject to the exact rules and regulations they are promoting. This needs to change immediately. We as a society are making rules for a population that we are not even listening to. When laws and policies are brought into existence who does it effect? It effects individuals with intellectual disabilities who are not even part of the regulatory conversation. I used to think that inclusion was a good idea prior to my experiences at RPP and hearing the responses of the adults in this study with intellectual disabilities. I thought “who wouldn’t want inclusion”? The short answer is that students with intellectual disabilities, at least the ones in this study, don’t. When thinking about simply putting people of all intellectual abilities in one
room, it seems like a good idea at surface value, but dig a little deeper and it isn’t so nice. When interviewing my participants and hearing their horror stories of inclusion classrooms, it opened my eyes. They spoke about having a teacher aide all the time which singled them out compared to the rest. Being awkward in class, being uncomfortable talking, not having friends, being on edge all the time, getting the answers wrong if called on, and just a general state of terror when in regular classes. They all spoke of the ability to be themselves, not having anxiety, being more relaxed, learning more, making more friends, and enjoying school much more when at RPP because every student had a disability and they were more or less all in the same situation. Everyone was similar in ability level and the sense of community was something they had never experienced in school. We, as a society, should not be obsessed with the political correctness of policy decisions as much as we should be aware of who these decisions effect. From what I heard from the participants in my study, students with intellectual disabilities during the transition phase of education do not want to be in an inclusive setting. They want to be in a setting with their same age and same ability level peers where they can learn in comfort, develop relationships, and not be rife with fear and anxiety in the name of inclusion. Being in a classroom with a majority of people that do not have intellectual disabilities seemed to be a negative experience based on the responses given during the interview process. When discussing inclusion in the name of individual rights, social justice, and equality, we need to ask whose interests we are actually serving. I think inclusion makes people without disabilities feel better about themselves by including the “other” in the name of being progressive and their perception of equality, when in reality it the exact opposite of what adults with intellectual disabilities want. We need to include adults with intellectual disabilities in legislative conversations, school board conversations, classroom conversations, academic conversations, and the inclusive discourse at
large. Perhaps then we can stop making decisions for a group and listen to what they have to say when making decisions for themselves.

With transition programs being created each year, more and more students will have the opportunity to attend a program such as RiverPass, just as they should. When I accepted my position with RPP, I was not very sure what to expect. What I found was the best educational setting I have ever been a part of. The students and staff welcomed me as one of their own and it was not long until I was an advocate for the program explaining how awesome it was to anyone who would listen. There is something inherently good about a program that helps teach students the basics of adult life. Employment, independent living skills, and our social lives are all things we take for granted, but we should not. The students at RPP do not.

It is my wish that every university in the world creates a transition program to include those that are historically excluded from college due to intellectual disabilities. And I think this will happen. It is the future. Just as women and African-Americans once were and sometimes still are, young adults with intellectual disabilities often are barred from entry into institutions that the dominant culture reserves for themselves. Although these barriers still exist, I hope we are moving in the right direction by being more destructive to them.

**Future Research**

There is much future research to be done in this area, as transition education is considered new compared to the rest of the educational field. Many consider it a radical idea that someone with an intellectual disability can thrive on a college campus, but this is becoming more and more common. Just as race and gender restrictions have been lowered among society with regard to barriers of entry, intellectual disability is a wall which is currently being chopped down.
The data used for this project is vast and can be used in other ways in order to produce research. It turned out to be richer, deeper, and have more breadth than I had predicted. I feel like this data could be used for years to come and I plan on continuing to conduct research with it. The population investigated in this project is one that can be difficult to gain access to and I feel privileged to not only be able to conduct research involving them, but to be part of their lives and them part of mine. I have learned much from students of mine with intellectual disabilities over the years and I look forward to continuing the exchange of information and experiences with them.

In the future, I would like to expand this project by creating a database of more than nine program graduates, potentially for every graduate I can get in touch with. There is unfortunately a perceived lack of support for young adults with intellectual disabilities once they exit IDEA services and staying in touch with them after the age of 21 would be potentially beneficial to RPP, the program graduates, and to research opportunities. I think there are good things that would come from this communication. The field of postsecondary transition is a fast growing one and will see more literature dedicated to it in the next years. I plan on being a part of this growth and applying my data to more projects in the future.

I had the opportunity to meet and speak with the RPP external evaluator Dr. Frank Rusch, considered the founding father of transition, during the final steps of the dissertation process. When discussing my research, he recommended conducting a matched pair study with my data in order to compare my findings to adults in the community that did not attend RPP. I think this is an excellent idea and seems to be the next logical step in my future.
**Essence**

The essence of the attributions of the RiverPass program is the employment, independent living, and social realm experiences lived by the students in the program are life-altering for the better. The program imparts knowledge, experience, and relationships that help people with intellectual disabilities achieve more than they ever thought possible. As one of the participants said during an interview, “It’s a life changer!”
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A:

IRB APPROVAL

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA
Office of the Vice President for Research & Economic Development
Office for Research Compliance

September 5, 2017

Zachary A. Knight
Dept. of ELPTS
College of Education
Box 870232

Re: IRB#: 17-OR-295 “Post-Prek Outcomes of Young Adults with Significant Disabilities: Attributions of Program Impact”

Dear Mr. Knight:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Your application will expire on September 4, 2018. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazard to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent form to provide to your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Carpeyia L. Moore, MSM, CHS, CCR
Director & Research Compliance Officer

358 Rolfe Administration Building | Box 870127 | Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127
205-348-8461 | Fax 205-348-7189 | Toll Free 1-877-820-3666

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UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA
HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM

Informed Consent for a Non-Medical Study

Study title: Postschool Outcomes of Young Adults with Significant Disabilities: Attributions of Program Impact

Zachary A. Knight, Graduate Assistant, SPEMA, College of Education

You are being asked to take part in a research study.

This study is called Postschool Outcomes of Young Adults with Significant Disabilities: Attributions of Program Impact. The study is being done by Zachary A Knight, who is a graduate student at the University of Alabama. Mr. Knight is being supervised by Professor Kagendo Mutua who is a professor of special education and multiple abilities at the University of Alabama.

What is this study about? What is the investigator trying to learn? This study is being done to find out more about what the graduates of the CrossingPoints Program are currently doing.

Why is this study important or useful? This knowledge is important/useful because the CrossingPoints program serves adults with intellectual disabilities from ages 18-21 and we do not know what happens to students after they graduate. The results of this study will help educators, researchers, other transition programs, and society understand better ways to help students with intellectual disabilities.

Why have I been asked to be in this study? You have been asked to be in this study because you are a graduate of the CrossingPoints Program. You were selected because you are one of the students that has completed the program that we have contact information for.

How many people will be in this study? About 6 other people will be in this study. There will be a minimum of 5 and a maximum of 10 total participants.

What will I be asked to do in this study? If you meet the criteria and agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do these things:
You will complete 1 or 2 interviews with myself and a former teacher. The teacher will simply be there to observe and add to the comfort level.

**How much time will I spend being this study?**
Each interview will take 1 hour and a potential follow up interview will take an hour as well. This is a total of 2 hours maximum. The entire study will take between 1 and 2 hours of your time and may take place on 1 or 2 days.

**Will being in this study cost me anything?**
The study will not cost you anything.

**Will I be compensated for being in this study?**
You will not be compensated for being in this study.

**What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?**
There is little to no risk to participating in this study.

**What are the benefits (good things) that may happen if I am in this study?**
There are no direct benefits to you, but you may help future students with disabilities and help society understand adults with disabilities.

**What are the benefits to science or society?**
This study may help educators, students, program directors, society, people with intellectual disabilities, and people without intellectual disabilities understand the outcomes of transition programs and the effects transition education can have.

**How will my privacy be protected?**
The interviews will be conducted in your home and the results of the interview will not be shared with anyone that is not present. You may control who is or isn’t in the room with us and may choose whether or not doors are open or closed and whether or not they are locked. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your privacy and no one will know about your involvement, unless you choose to tell them. The researcher will keep notes and recordings under lock and key inside a safe. The electronic recordings will be on double password protected devices. You have the choice as to whether or not you want to be recorded. If you do not want to be, your wish will be honored.

**How will my confidentiality be protected?**
Your confidentiality will be protected by keeping the interview data on double password protected electronic devices and written notes inside a safe that will itself be inside a locked closet. Only 4 people can access the data and the single copy of the ID coding sheet will be kept inside a safe. All identifiers will be destroyed.
What are the alternatives to being in this study? Do I have other choices?
The alternative to being in this study is not to participate.

What are my rights as a participant in this study?
Taking part in this study is voluntary. It is your free choice. You can refuse to be in it at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. There will be no effect on your relations with the University of Alabama.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board ("the IRB") is the committee that protects the rights of people in research studies. The IRB may review study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

Who do I call if I have questions or problems?
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study right now, please ask them. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study later on, please call the investigator Zachary A Knight at 205-482-4581.

If you have questions about your rights as a person in a research study, call Ms. Tanta Myles, the Research Compliance Officer of the University, at 205-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066.

You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at http://ovpred.ua.edu/research-compliance/prco/ or email the Research Compliance office at participantoutreach@ua.edu.

After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online at the outreach website or you may ask the investigator for a copy of it and mail it to the University Office for Research Compliance, Box 870127, 358 Rose Administration Building, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127.

I have read this consent form. I have had a chance to ask questions. I agree to take part in it. I will receive a copy of this consent form to keep.

I consent to being audio recorded during the interview process:  Yes  No

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 9/15/10
EXPIRATION DATE: 9/14/2018