

Case Study on Transition: An American Indian Student with a Learning Disability  
Karen L. Applequist, Lissa J. Keegan, Jose J. Benitez, and Joshua Schwalbach  
Northern Arizona University

**Abstract:** In this paper the results of a case study of an American Indian student with a learning disability who successfully transitioned to college will be presented. The student's attitude and behavior were shaped by his culture and his success was positively influenced by family, community, and supports from educational settings.

**Key Words:** transition, American Indian, self-determination

In the United States graduation from high school is marked by celebration for all students and heightened anticipation for many departing for college. Yet, not all American students have the same opportunity to be successful in higher education. American Indian undergraduates face more risk factors than their non-native counterparts; they are likely to be to single parents, to attend school part-time, or to need to work (Lee, Donlan, & Brown, 2010; US Department of Education, 1998).

American Indian adolescents with disabilities frequently encounter further difficulties when transitioning to college or university. High school students with disabilities in America receive special instruction and support under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), but they no longer have the same support system when they enter college. Their success largely depends upon their ability to get needed assistance available at college. Wehmeyer (1999) recommends that high schools encourage self-determined behaviors that will enhance their ability to be successful adults.

Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and Wehmeyer (1998) defined self-determination as "a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one's strengths and limitations, together with a belief of oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination" (p. 2). Wehmeyer (1999) draws on this definition to highlight the four functional characteristics of self-determination: a) person acts autonomously, b) behaviors are self-regulated, c) the person initiates and responds to the event(s) in a psychologically-empowered manner, and d) the person reacts in a self-realizing manner (p. 56). Although these four characteristics can be influenced by "age, opportunity, capacity, and [current] circumstances" (Wehmeyer, 1999, p. 57), all four must be present for behavior to be considered self-determined.

With the emphasis on autonomous behavior and individual goals, this definition of self-determination is seen as "Westernized," making it difficult to apply to collectivist cultures, where independence outside of the group is not sought. Many students from other countries share this collectivist orientation and may face similar concerns with this definition. Frankland, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, and Blackmountain (2004) conclude that many of the principles of self-determination are consonant with the Dine (Navajo - one of the larger American Indian tribes in the US) culture, but note the emphasis is on interdependence rather than independence. However, generalizing these conclusions to other tribes would be inadvisable, and to date there have not been any published studies of this nature.

The purpose of this study was to explore those factors that contributed to the successful transition to college of an American Indian student who has been diagnosed as having a Learning Disability (a psychological processing disorder affecting spoken or written language, including mathematics). Accordingly, we focused on intrinsic (motivations and attitudes of the focal person and other significant persons) and extrinsic (familial, cultural, environmental, and educational) influences impacting his self-determination and success in transition.

### Context of the Study

The focal person was born and raised in a very rural community on reservation lands in the southwestern region of the United States. Children from his community are able to attend elementary and high school in nearby communities on the reservation and are no longer sent to boarding schools. However, opportunities to attend college close to the reservation are very limited, forcing adolescents to leave their communities.

Tippeconnic (2011) presents a framework for the values of American Indians emphasizing what he refers to as the 4 Rs - relationships, responsibility, reciprocity, and redistribution representing a collectivist orientation. Limb, Hodge and Panos (2008) juxtapose American Indian values and those of mainstream American society highlighting those of collectivist and individualistic orientations respectively. The American Indian culture traditionally values respecting and caring for others, patience, and humility while mainstream American culture values individualism, competitiveness, and attention-seeking behaviors.

### Methods

This case study was designed to explore in-depth those factors contributing to an individual's successful transition and was part of a larger national study focused on transition of culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities. The focal person was identified as successful as he was close to completing his college education. After obtaining his consent, he was asked to identify those individuals who he felt impacted him in positive ways prior to and during his transition who would be interviewed. General guidelines identifying topical areas of emphasis (e.g., barriers, supports, significant people, role of family and culture) aligned with the research questions were reviewed in preparation for all interviews. For purposes of continuity, all interviews were conducted by one member of the research team. A second team member regularly met with the primary interviewer as interviews were conducted to discuss emerging themes. Audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed for purposes of analysis.

During the initial coding process, QDA Miner (a computerized qualitative data analysis program) was used. Operational code categories (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 57) were developed based on the original purpose of the case study. These categories included perceived barriers to successful transition, significant persons, behaviors and attitudes of significant persons, behaviors and characteristics of the focal person, and other influences. Each of these code categories had between 4 and 11 codes, for a total of 39 codes. Although we started with this top-down approach (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), additional codes within the above categories were added as patterns emerged from the data.

An axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 2007) approach was used to further investigate two codes that yielded a large amount of coding. Once the coding structure was finalized one member of the research team coded all of the transcripts while another coded 25% of them to establish inter-rater reliability. Initial inter-rater reliability was 96% and increased to 100% after the raters discussed and negotiated discrepant codes. The research team, comprised of two special educators, a counselor and a graduate student in student affairs, met to review and discuss the patterns identified during coding and agreed on six emergent themes from the data.

## Findings

### Duane's Story

Duane was identified as learning disabled when he was in elementary school and struggled with reading and math throughout his academic career. He disliked elementary and middle school; but flourished in high school, when he joined the track team. Running is a long-standing tradition in many American Indian tribes (e.g., Gilbert, 2010; Nabokov, 1981) and many members of Duane's family are runners. He excelled at running, winning many races, and he was offered a number of athletic scholarships.

Once he decided he wanted to go to college, he worked harder in all of his high school classes. He chose to be fully included in high school, and benefited from further tutoring made available to all students. He was allowed to use a calculator in math classes and took full advantage of the dictionary. Through a transition class, he learned what to expect in college, and visited college campuses. He ultimately decided to attend a small community college over 300 miles from home where few American Indian students were enrolled. While the transition was difficult for him, he felt the smaller school was preferable so he could get to know his instructors better than at a large university. After completing his associate degree, he transferred to a much larger public university closer to his home.

Because tribal traditions are integral to his daily life, he felt very isolated when he first went to college and he created audiotapes of native songs that helped him feel more connected. He missed the ceremonies and festivities that are conducted year round in his community, and described these experiences as making him feel "pure" again. The university's Native American Student Services supports students academically, socially and culturally. Duane availed himself of the academic supports, but felt the other services were tailored for students from different tribes. When asked if he experienced discrimination in college because of his learning disability, Duane indicated that was not the case. The only discrimination he described was sensing that some classmates felt he would not do his fair share on a small group assignment based on his ethnicity, not his disability.

### Multiple Perspectives of Duane

Interviews were conducted with Duane (on two separate occasions) and four individuals identified as playing important roles in his successful transition, including two cross-country coaches, a reading professor, and the disability advisor from his community college. In this section we will highlight the recurring themes across the interviews.

*Duane's Self-Determination is Rooted in his Tribal Belief System*

American Indian ideals of perseverance and diligence are inherent in Duane's statements and actions and fostered and sustained his self-determination. He did not allow his learning disability to dissuade him from his goals.

"Knowing your boundaries, your potential, he just gets everything right. He didn't bite off more than he could chew, he just did a little bit at a time and did a good job at what he is doing and I think that doing it that way, he became a lot more confident in his abilities as a student and as an athlete and as a person" (Coach).

His motivation to attend college was rooted in the need to give back to his people. He pursued a degree in education so that he could return to the reservation and teach at the high school. Once he set his goal, he worked diligently to reach it. "There is something there with that kid that says, if you push that kid in the right direction, he will take it from there" (Coach).

"As long as you are willing to do what it takes and stay up late working and running on the weekends, all that is part of being successful, just working hard at it. I guess that is my whole main goal here, to show people that you can make it" (Duane).

The disability advisor at the community college described Duane's work ethic:

"He just seemed to stick with it, his dedication to his studies again, for his age, stood out and with the additional load of having track, it makes it even harder. You combine that with a learning disability it is even harder, so his stick-to-it-iveness was excellent, his dedication."

### *Role of Family was Critical to his Success*

Members of his family provided a foundation for a successful transition. "A lot of people come up to me and they would give me encouragement to stay in school" (Duane). His mother, in particular, was extremely supportive of Duane as he notes, "She was always telling me 'don't be afraid to ask questions; there's nothing wrong with asking questions.'" Duane's parents emphasized the importance of considering college. "They always kind of talked to us about how education is important – part of today's society and that's what you need, a good education" (Duane).

Duane's college track coach admired the support that his family gave him:

"His parents are great people, they supported him in anything he wanted to do and everything he wanted to do and my part is just in addition to what the parents had already done, so I just kind of picked it up from there, just support him... I think that he could just pick up the phone and call his parents and they would do everything in their power to make sure that whatever was going on was taken care of and so I give them a lot of credit, just this family support."

Duane also felt comfortable asking his older brother for guidance. "And he's like 'I mean if you have any questions and just, just call and ask me I'm more than willing to help you'" (Duane). In addition, Duane received emotional and monetary support from his grandparents: "Yeah, my

grandparents are real supportive... Like when I tell them like yeah, I'm gonna be goin' to college and they would be more happy and excited for us" (Duane).

### *Identity Focused on Running, Minimizing any Stigmatism from his Disability*

The overarching theme that emerges from the interviews is that Duane is a well-respected athlete, and that despite struggling in school because of his learning disability, is seen as a successful student. Running is not only part of his cultural heritage; it helped him to establish an identity other than 'the student with a learning disability.'" Ever since I started to excel in running, that's when the whole teasing of the learning disability went down" (Duane). However, he also expressed acceptance of his learning disability, referring to his high school experience:

"I mean they would say stuff to me about it, but I'd be like, 'Yeah, I mean I am, there's nothing I could do about it.' ...I think that's where I developed that whole sense of not being ashamed of my learning disability" (Duane).

### *Supports Offered through Athletic Programs Mitigated his Disability*

As a student athlete Duane was eligible for access to scholarships, lessening the financial burden. "Getting serious about college happened my junior year when I started getting scholarship letters" (Duane). Moreover, he also received additional tutoring given to athletes and mentoring from his coaches that enabled him to keep his grades up so he could continue to compete. "I don't think he'd get here without running" (College professor). In many ways, the supports and mentoring he received because he was a competitive athlete mitigated the impact of his learning disability on his education. "For Duane to be invited into this program, we would have to see a lot of talent in him, with the learning disability" (Coach). He continued:

"The average Joe Student that shows up, not many people care about him like they do the athletes. I mean I watched him literally every day he was here, but you know the average Joe Smith who shows up, nobody know he is there unless he tells someone basically" (Coach).

### *Internal Conflict between Cultural Expectations and Pursuit of Excellence*

Excelling at running, however, also caused internal conflict for Duane, in being recognized as an individual in a culture that values humility and collectivism:

"I was like I want to go on...it did occur to me a couple times that I just wanted to stop with everything I am doing and just live life, equal, I mean I am equal, I am not saying I am above but I mean as far as they [team and classmates] are concerned they think that I am above and whatnot" (Duane).

Duane struggled with the decision to leave his community:

"I mean, the cultural thing it really does affect what we want to do in life... for cultural reasons you know we have to come back because we have duties to perform and if we don't do these duties then the ceremonies will die so you have to kind of think about that, whether you want to put our culture at risk of losing it just because I want to go around

here in [large city off reservation], just because I want to go overseas to go run or something like that and you really have to take stuff like that into consideration” (Duane).

Duane’s culture also impacted his college and career path:

“Like my first choice was as a physical therapist like sports doctor. So later on I kind of figured out just thinking about it about how much criticism I would get from the people saying that I shouldn't be doing this because I'm not one of the people that is naturally gifted with that ability to help people out” (Duane).

### *Interconnectedness of Support Network*

It was readily apparent that there was a willingness of the various key people in Duane’s life to work together to support him. His coach in high school would contact his teacher if there were problems with his assignments. His mother established contact and relationships with his teachers and counselors in high school and his coaches and disability counselor at the community college. The counselor at the community college worked closely with his coaches and his teachers to monitor his progress and make sure he was getting the help he needed. His extended family supported him, and checked in with each other on his progress.

### Discussion

Duane's success can be attributed to a complex array of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. His attitude and behavior embodied the four functional characteristics of self-determination (Wehmeyer, 1999) and were influenced by his tribal belief system. Moreover, his talent as a runner was a distinct advantage to him throughout the transition process. He would not have been successful without important support from family, community, and key staff from both high school and college. The importance of self-determination and a broad range of supports will be explored further.

### Self-Determination

The four essential characteristics of self-determination were earlier identified as: a) person acted autonomously, b) behaviors are self-regulated, c) the person initiated and responded to the event(s) in a psychologically-empowered manner, and d) the person reacted in a self-realizing manner (Wehmeyer, 1999). The process of individuation was clearly reflected in this case study. Duane was presented with many opportunities to make choices and he made those decisions on his own. For example, he chose to be fully included in high school rather than be placed in the resource room. Duane made the decision to become an athlete in high school knowing that he possessed innate talent, even though he struggled with his unintended sports star status. He established goals for himself and sought the support he needed to meet those goals. His goals reflect an understanding of his role in the community, and his personal strengths and limitations. He constantly struggled to achieve the desired harmony and his place within his family and community. Duane accepted his learning disability and understood that he needed to work more diligently than his classmates to be successful in school.

In Duane's case, his cultural beliefs and practices were powerful influences on his self-determination. His overarching goal of becoming a teacher so that he could give back to his tribe

in a meaningful way sustained him throughout his studies in college. As is the case with the Dine (Frankland et al., 2004), the construct of self-determination is fairly compatible with his culture, with some alteration. Emphasis on the clan, family, and community, above the individual, influences how the process of self-determination evolves.

### System of Support

Duane drew enormous strength from his family and his community, enabling him to develop more confidence in navigating the transition from high school to college. His mother, in particular, provided guidance and support. All of his immediate and extended family were proud of his accomplishments and gave him moral support. He established a mentoring relationship with his high school coach, who is also a member of his tribe, that continued after he graduated. Having a mentor who shares the same cultural values and experiences has been found to be much more effective (Campbell & Campbell, 2007). Teachers, coaches and support personnel in both high school and college mentored him in significant ways. His success and those of other culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities can often be attributed largely to mentoring (Leake, Burgstahler & Izzo, 2011).

Because the enrollment was quite small, faculty and staff at the community college knew students on a personal level and created a web of support that students attending larger state universities do not have. For example, Duane felt comfortable enough with his reading professor that he would frequently drop by her office just to visit but this type of relationship occurs less frequently in larger schools.

Duane's experience is characterized by many positive or protective factors that other American Indian students with learning disabilities may not have. His athleticism facilitated his transition, enabling him to become more goal directed and focused on his running and studies. He did not experience the risk factors (delayed enrollment, part-time attendance, financial problems, having dependents, being a single parent, working full time or completing a GED) many American Indian students may have as undergraduates (U.S. Department of Education, 1998, p. 89).

Yet, this case study reveals the types of supports that can be helpful to other American Indian students with disabilities. Until Duane shifted his focus to his strength (running) he struggled in school. The structure and continuity of the supports coordinated by his coaches were instrumental in facilitating his success both racing and academically. While the intensity of these supports are not available to most students, effort should be made to create or replicate these types of opportunities for other American Indian students with learning disabilities. Figure 1 depicts the positive influences that enabled Duane to be successful. Duane was supported by his family and culture, but also directly influenced by the relationship between his Coach and Disability Resources Counselor (the person overseeing educational accommodations for students with disabilities) at the community college, who monitored his grades and progress. This mentoring/monitoring provided a safety net that gave Duane the freedom to grow as a student.

Figure 2 is a model proposed for American Indian students with disabilities who are not athletes. While the proposed model would apply to all students with disabilities, it has specific relevance to students who are American Indian transitioning from native communities who face

unique challenges (Lee, Donlan, & Brown, 2010). One of the key contributors to Duane's success was the connectedness between his support networks (family/culture, disability resources, and the athletic program), with his coach being his mentor. Since not all students have access to the mentoring relationship of a coach, the proposed model substitutes three currently existing systems, Student Services (offering career counseling, and academic advisement), Counseling Services (offering individual and group counseling to address personal issues) and Disability Resources (assisting with academic accommodations). We believe that if these three systems work closely together to support a student, they can recreate the mentoring/monitoring relationship of a coach. This also brings up one of the striking differences between Duane's two experiences in higher education. In addition to the coach, one of the services provided by Disability Resources at the community college was a counselor/advisor, who helped him plan his schedule, recommended courses/professors and monitored his progress. He did not have this same depth of service from the larger university. However, we would argue that having a "point person" who is able to coordinate the services available to the student from the three systems is something that universities should consider.

Presently, at many schools, although each system is aware of what the others offer, there is not active coordination between them. Thus, students with disabilities, who may have difficulty negotiating service systems, may be left on their own to seek out services from each independent system. The services offered by the different systems are rich and varied: Student Services offers individualized academic tutoring and connections to additional academic support as well as skill-building in reading, note-taking, research and project planning, test preparation, and test-taking strategies to all students. Disability Resources helps students access classroom material through accommodations. Counseling Services are available for all students, but are unlikely to be oriented to developing the self-advocacy skills particularly needed by students with disabilities.

### Implications for Practice

Although Duane's athletic ability opened doors for him that would not have opened for other American Indian students with disabilities, there are nonetheless some very important lessons to be learned from his experience. One lesson is that teachers and other staff who have successfully completed a college education off reservation and are working in native communities must recognize their important role as mentors to students who are transitioning; they can help demystify the process.

At the high school level, special education personnel and transition specialists must continue to promote self-advocacy skills and self-determination in the context of person-centered planning. A key element of person-centered planning is the identification of strengths on which to build. While Duane's athletic talent was an obvious strength for him, other students may struggle to identify their strengths or interests. The literature suggests that professionals frequently operate from a deficit-based model rather than a strengths-based one (Smith & Nevin, 2005). Beyond making a paradigm shift, there are several strategies high school and college personnel can use. Students should be encouraged to view their culture as a resource and positive influence in their lives. Various tools, such as interest inventories, can be used to gather information that will help students learn more about their interests. Students should be actively



engaged in the transition planning process, identifying their goals, so that they can assume more responsibility for decisions when they begin college.

Duane chose to begin his college education at a small community college, and it may be desirable for American Indian students with disabilities to start out in a community college where they would have a greater chance of getting individual attention. In Duane's case a system was in place at the community college for student athletes so that they could be academically successful. American Indian students with disabilities should be familiar with the range of supports available to them at any institution and should know how to access them. New student orientation programs foster the acclimation of students with disabilities to the university by ensuring they are aware of the various programs and supports available on campus.

If collaboration between Student Services, Disability Resources and Counseling Services is enhanced, it should be possible to provide all students with disabilities with systems of support that mimic those available for many student athletes. Such a system might provide an assigned advisor who assists the student in planning their schedule, offers advice as to which professors would best meet their learning style, monitors the student's progress, and coordinates services between Student Services, Disability Resources and Counseling Services. In this scenario, the advisor is acting as the student's "coach."

In cases where the student is from an American Indian background, there should also be coordination between these three systems and programs for American Indian students, if available. Improved coordination among relevant systems and programs will help ensure that students with disabilities do not "fall through the cracks." As universities strive to achieve higher rates of recruitment and retention, these supports should be part of the marketing strategy so that students with disabilities can make informed decisions about which institution to attend.

Recognition of the role of family members in a student's life is vital and must be respected throughout the transition process. Duane's parents were actively involved in his education and were welcomed to campus. Helping students with issues around identity and career paths should be sensitive to the collectivist orientation and cultural norms. Programs developed for American Indian students can play a significant role in helping students bridge the cultural gap between home and school. These programs should be designed for all students representing different tribes who have different tribal beliefs and customs. Indigenous students with disabilities residing in other countries would benefit from a similar model that is culturally responsive.

Future research should include participants from other tribes as there can be significant differences between tribes. A better understanding of the ways high schools and colleges can coordinate their programs and processes in a manner that will benefit American Indian students with disabilities is critical in promoting their academic success.

**Karen Applequist** is a Professor of Special Education at Northern Arizona University and is the Training Director of the Arizona University Center on Disabilities. Her research has focused on

improving special education services for individuals and families who are culturally and linguistically diverse.

**Lissa Keegan** is a special educator currently completing her doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction at Northern Arizona University. Her doctoral program is focused on special education of culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

**Jose Benitez** completed his graduate degree in Community Counseling at Northern Arizona University. He is currently is a community counselor in Cottonwood, Arizona.

**Joshua Schwalbach** is completing his graduate degree in Counseling with a Student Affairs Emphasis at Northern Arizona University.

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Correspondence should be directed to: Karen.Applequist@nau.edu

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Figure 1: College Influences on Duane.

Duane's attitudes and behaviors were heavily influenced by family and culture. The athletic program coordinated closely with Disability Resources.

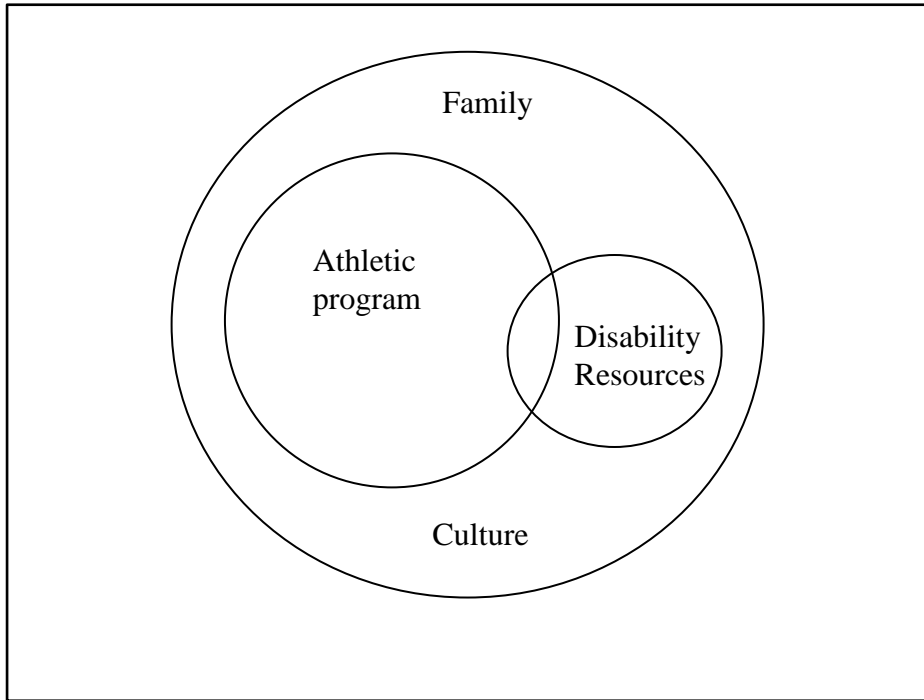


Figure 2: Recommended College Supports for American Indian Students with Disabilities.

American Indian students with disabilities benefit from a coordinated approach from all three programs.

