



# LIFE Beyond the Classroom

Transition Strategies  
for Young People  
with Disabilities

Second Edition

Paul Wehman

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## Transition Strategies for Young People with Disabilities

*Second Edition*

by

*Paul Wehman, Ph.D.*  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond

with invited contributors

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## About the Authors

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**Paul Wehman, Ph.D.**, Professor of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1314 West Main Street, Richmond, Virginia 23284-0211

Paul Wehman is a professor in both the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Medical College of Virginia, Virginia Commonwealth University, and the School of Education, Virginia Commonwealth University. Dr. Wehman has taught many courses in special education, published various special education articles, and been involved in teacher training. Internationally recognized for his service and scholarly contributions in the fields of special education, psychology, and vocational rehabilitation, Dr. Wehman has received numerous awards in both special education and rehabilitation, including the 1990 Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., Foundation Award in Mental Retardation; a 1992 Leadership Award from the Association for Persons in Supported Employment; and the Distinguished Service Award from the President's Committee on Employment for Persons with Disabilities in October 1992. He is the author or editor of more than 100 books, research monographs, journal articles, and chapters in the areas of traumatic brain injury, mental retardation, supported employment, and special education. He is also the editor of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, an international journal published by Elsevier. His specific research interests include transition from school to work, supported employment, developmental disabilities, and brain injury.

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**Patricia Brown-Glover, M.Ed.**, Transition Planner, Richmond Public Schools, Exceptional Education, 301 North Ninth Street, Richmond, Virginia 23219

Patricia Brown-Glover is the transition planner for Richmond Public Schools. She is responsible for developing and coordinating transition-related guidelines and activities for all students in Exceptional Education programs. Prior to her appointment as transition planner, she served as a training associate with the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment at Virginia Commonwealth University and taught students with mild disabilities in both rural and urban settings.

**Mike Cosel**, 13 Pleasant Drive, Setauket, New York 11733

Mike Cosel is in construction and property management. He serves on the Board of Directors of Island Harvest, a food service program; the Assistance Dog United Campaign; and Suffolk County Special Olympics.

**Ronne Cosel**, 13 Pleasant Drive, Setauket, New York 11733

Ronne Cosel has recently embarked on a second career as a full-time professional artist following a career as a public librarian. She is also on the Board of Directors of Freya's Sensory Center.

**Elizabeth Evans Getzel, M.A.**, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1314 West Main Street, Richmond, Virginia 23284-0211

Elizabeth Evans Getzel is Research Associate with the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment at Virginia Commonwealth University. She has worked for a number of years conducting analyses of federal and state policies to assess their impact on services and programs for individuals with disabilities, developing and implementing evaluation studies to identify effective strategies and programs within service delivery systems, and providing technical assistance to accommodate students with disabilities in secondary and postsecondary settings.

**Karen Gibson, M.S.**, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1314 West Main Street, Richmond, Virginia 23284-0211

Karen Gibson holds a bachelor's degree in Administration of Justice and a master's degree in Rehabilitation Counseling from Virginia Commonwealth University. Ms. Gibson has been employed in the human services field since 1988, holding such positions as a supported living residential counselor and an employment specialist. Before joining the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment, Ms. Gibson worked for 3 years as a senior employment specialist for a local community services board. In her present position as a vocational employment counselor, she is responsible for providing supported employment services for individuals referred to the Natural Supports Transition Project using the Community and Workplace Support Model. In addition, Ms. Gibson has had extensive experience identifying and developing supports within the community and workplace to address both work-related and non-work-related issues as they pertain to individuals referred to the Natural Supports Transition Project.

**Cary Griffin, M.A.**, Director of Training, Rural Institute on Disabilities Research and Training Center, 52 Corbin Hall, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana 59812

Cary Griffin is Director of Training for the Rural Institute on Disabilities Research and Training Center and the University Affiliated Program. Mr. Griffin has extensive experience as a direct services worker, a job developer, and an administrator of adult vocational programs for individuals with severe disabilities. He consults internationally in the areas of career

development, natural supports, management/leadership, organizational change, and resource development. He is especially interested in creating community partnerships, facilitating leadership in business and human services, self-advocacy, and systems change.

**Susan Lehmann Griffin, Ph.D.**, Senior Research Associate, Developmental Disabilities Training Institute, CB 3370, Carr Mill Annex, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27599-3370

Susan Lehmann Griffin is Senior Research Associate at the Developmental Disabilities Training Institute (DDTI) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is also involved in research and training involving customer service within human services delivery systems and person-centered planning/innovative service delivery. Prior to her position at Chapel Hill, Ms. Griffin worked with individuals who have visual impairment or blindness at the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment at Virginia Commonwealth University, focusing on supported employment.

**John J. Gugerty, M.S.**, Center on Education and Work, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 964 Educational Sciences Building, 1025 West Johnson Street, Madison, Wisconsin 53706

John J. Gugerty has been an academic staff member of the Center on Education and Work since 1975. He has staffed and directed a number of state and federally funded projects that addressed one or more facets of career/vocational preparation of youth and adults with disabilities and, specifically, staff development activities. In addition, he has volunteered with state and county parent groups (Learning Disabilities Association, The Arc) and local/state Consumer Advisory Groups sponsored by the Wisconsin Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. He is also a member of Wisconsin's State-Level Oversight Committee for the Implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act, known as the ADA Wisconsin Partnership, which serves as the steering committee for Wisconsin's Disability and Business Technical Assistance Center. Mr. Gugerty also serves on the statewide Special Population Transition Action Team, whose goal is inclusion of those who learn differently or with difficulty in Technical Preparation and School-to-Work Programs.

**Christine Hess, M.Ed.**, Senior Associate, Stetson and Associates, Inc., 13910 Champion Forest Drive, Suite 208, Houston, Texas 77069

Christine Hess has more than 20 years' administrative and teaching experience in special and general education, from early childhood through postsecondary, with emphasis in severe disabilities, community-based instruction, transition, and inclusive education. Before joining Stetson and Associates in 1992 as Senior Associate, she worked as a regional education consultant, an assistant principal for instruction, a supervisor, and a classroom teacher. Ms. Hess has assisted hundreds of school districts and state agencies in the implementation and evaluation of recommended practices for all students.

**Kelly Kane**, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1314 West Main Street, Richmond, Virginia 23284-0211

Kelly Kane holds a bachelor's degree in psychology and is taking graduate courses in special education at Virginia Commonwealth University. Since 1992, Ms. Kane has been employed in the supported employment field for people with severe disabilities, working for 2 years as an employment specialist and for 1 year managing a team of employment specialists in Syracuse, New York. Since 1994, she has worked at the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment at Virginia Commonwealth University as a vocational employment counselor, providing supported employment services for individuals referred to the Natural Supports Transition Project. Ms. Kane has had extensive experience identifying and developing supports within the community and workplace to address both work-related and non-work-related issues as they pertain to these individuals.

**John Kregel, Ed.D.**, Professor of Special Education, Associate Director and Research Director, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1314 West Main Street, Richmond, Virginia 23284-0211

John Kregel is Professor of Special Education and Associate Director and Research Director of the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment, both at Virginia Commonwealth University. Dr. Kregel has experience as a special education teacher and administrator. He is the author or co-author of numerous books, journal articles, book chapters, research monographs, and other publications on school-to-work transition and supported employment.

**Melinda Mast**, 137 Long Tree Road, Springfield, Illinois 62704

Melinda Mast is Project Director for United Cerebral Palsy Associations (UCP) employment initiatives. She also assists UCP affiliates nationwide and other agencies to convert to a system of community-based services. She is a strong promoter of an individualized approach to services for people with the most severe disabilities. Her background includes teaching and directing vocational services for people with disabilities.

**Pam Sherron, M.Ed.**, Program Manager, Employment Services Division, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1314 West Main Street, Richmond, Virginia 23284-0211

Pam Sherron is Program Manager for the Employment Services Division of the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment at Virginia Commonwealth University. She has been involved in the implementation of supported employment since 1986. Before then, she taught adult basic education classes and personnel management.



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**Darlene Unger, M.Ed.**, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1314 West Main Street, Richmond, Virginia 23284-0211

Darlene Unger is Project Coordinator for the Natural Supports Transition Project at the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment at Virginia Commonwealth University. She has been responsible for developing and implementing a natural supports approach to providing supported employment services. She is particularly interested in working with employers and community organizations in developing and providing support for people with disabilities. Ms. Unger is a doctoral student in the Urban Services Program at Virginia Commonwealth University.

**Michael D. West, Ph.D.**, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1314 West Main Street, Richmond, Virginia 23284-0211

Michael D. West holds a master of education degree in Special Education and Habilitative Services from the University of New Orleans in Louisiana, and a doctorate of philosophy in education from Virginia Commonwealth University. His direct service experiences have included projects in special education, residential programs, vocational services, and general community functioning. He is Research Associate with the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment at Virginia Commonwealth University. He has also authored or co-authored numerous journal articles and book chapters on supported employment, special education, and other disability-related issues.

## Preface

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The education and employment of young adults with disabilities in the United States must remain a leading priority. The education of individuals with disabilities is critical to the foundation of adult adjustment and success in work and the community. Without an education that focuses on the development of personal competence, life skills, and employment opportunities, young adults with disabilities are greatly handicapped in the complex modern society in which we live. Their education should focus on functional activities taught in real-life situations (e.g., community environments in close proximity to students without disabilities).

The other major building block for successful inclusion in the community is employment. Competitive employment is the most desirable alternative for young adults with disabilities and may take place in many different types of businesses, industries, and settings. Some individuals will choose to become self-employed; others will choose to work part time and continue school; others will go on to technical schools; and still others will enter the work force full time with the help of job coaches and other technological aids, such as voice recognition devices and computers. All students, however, need a chance to work *before* they leave school.

Translating educational experiences into meaningful employment is what transition from school to adulthood is all about. One cannot intelligently examine transition without simultaneously considering education and employment. Yet, transition involves more than employment. Community living, meaningful leisure pursuits, and confidence in personal relationships are also important aspects of transition. In both editions of *Life Beyond the Classroom*, we emphasize the importance of independent living skills and other nonvocational activities; yet, one of the most important vehicles to a successful adjustment in the community and personal happiness remains satisfaction with one's job. Although the specific job or working conditions may not be ideal, the fact remains that any employment is an important milestone for everyone in American society. Therefore, the careful planning of individualized transition from school to community life is absolutely essential.

In this second edition of *Life Beyond the Classroom*, a number of important themes emerge. For example, the value of supporting people with disabilities in work and community environments and providing them with experiences with classmates without disabilities in neighborhood schools is highlighted. We think that it is very important for these two groups of young people to be regularly exposed to one another and to learn how to manage the frustration and difficulties that are associated with a heterogeneous community environment. The continued protection and segregation of people with disabilities will not benefit them in their quest for greater self-esteem and inclusion in the community and workplace.

For too long, the well-meaning professionals who work with individuals with disabilities (e.g., counselors, special educators) have underestimated the very significant

potential of most people with disabilities. This book evidences our efforts to emphasize this potential. Having high aspirations for success can influence the actual outcomes of people with disabilities. We live in a rapidly changing society, both politically and technologically, and it can become easy to feel inept or overwhelmed. Yet, positive self-esteem and confidence can directly alter one's level of success. There are substantial doubts on the part of many in society about the quality and credibility of education for people with disabilities. Unfortunately, as long as thousands of students leave school every year without employment or a meaningful career pathway, the skeptics are given more ammunition for their position. This type of thinking is enhanced when there is a shortage of funds for expanding good programs or when misguided social priorities predominate.

Whatever the political climate (and these philosophies do move in cycles), there will always be young adults in need of education and work opportunities. Transition from school to adulthood has remained a major priority of state legislatures, as well as the U.S. government, primarily because intelligent and informed people know that the country's future rests upon the education and employment of its young people, thousands of whom have specialized needs or disabilities. As society becomes more complex and as technology and jobs become more specially designed, upgraded equipment and facilities, as well as a more sophisticated approach to training, will be required. Greater work experiences in the community, more intensive apprenticeships, greater use of business mentors, and employment during school all constitute a more successful approach to transition planning, according to observations since 1980.

Why would anyone, regardless of his or her political persuasion, argue against real work with benefits for people with disabilities? This should be the consummate bipartisan issue and should receive endorsement from all parties. All players involved benefit by employing people with disabilities. The individual with a disability has—often for the first time—a real job, benefits, and dignity. The employer gets a good worker and often will receive specialized support to train and maintain the individual's lifestyle. The family will be able to see their family member in a competent role in the workplace. Taxpayers will save money as the individual will no longer require services in a segregated day program year in and year out. The question then remains: Why do the vast majority of individuals with significant disabilities remain unemployed?

The answer to this question lies in the inability of advocates and people with disabilities to sufficiently market their capabilities and work potential. The existing adult services system in the United States, as well as around the world, has been deeply entrenched for several decades. To change this way of providing services, particularly in times of reduced funding due to a serious fiscal crunch, is extremely difficult. Hence, there is an overwhelming necessity to market the positive attributes of supported employment for people with disabilities on a local and national level.

Important gains and progress have been made in the education and employment of young people with disabilities since 1990, yet only in certain parts of the country. There is an unfortunate disparity among communities in successfully helping their young adults. In this second edition, we endeavor to provide many more individualized examples of transition planning in order to give the reader more specific and concrete examples of how to collaboratively plan individualized transitions with meaningful adult goals for people with disabilities. There is also a stronger focus on person-centered planning and career

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development with a clear message that, unless businesses and industry are involved in a more direct fashion, those training activities generated exclusively in the school environment are doomed to fail, being largely ungeneralizable.

It is hoped that this book will successfully touch the lives of thousands of university students and professionals who wish to accumulate more information and knowledge in the important areas of education and employment for young people with disabilities. The challenge is greater than ever. There is a critical need for professionals to take a more significant leadership role in the community on behalf of people with disabilities. Advocacy and involvement are essential to making transition work in a community. This book is based upon the notion that any community can have a successful transition program, but individuals with disabilities and their families and advocates must be actively involved and committed to envisioning successful employment and community outcomes for students after school.

## For the Reader

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Each chapter in this volume opens with a list of learning objectives that serve to introduce the chapter and preview its major points. Each chapter also closes with study questions that we hope the reader and, in some cases, the university professor will find helpful in understanding the major points. The study questions are offered as a way to help the reader to synthesize the information in the chapter in the most effective way.

The case studies that appear in this book are based on synthesized composites of the authors' experiences in the transition field. They are presented to help the reader to understand the basic underlying concepts of each chapter.

Each chapter features profiles of U.S. leaders in the fields of education and employment of young adults with disabilities. Choosing only 16 individuals to showcase in this volume was quite difficult because of the number of outstanding leaders working in the field. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the profiles presented here will provide role models for others.

In May 1992, the American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR) approved a new definition of mental retardation. Rather than using the specific IQ of 70 as a criterion for mental retardation, this new definition includes individuals with IQs ranging from 70 to 75. The new definition also focuses more specifically on assessment of adaptive skills and needed supports, basing the categorization of mental retardation on support required instead of labeling individuals as having mild, moderate, severe, or profound mental retardation. Levels of support (e.g., intermittent, extensive) are a very important aspect of this book. We believe that supports are crucial in determining how successful individuals with disabilities will be; yet, there remains a necessity to communicate broad differences between individual abilities. For that reason, we have continued to refer to some individuals as having mild levels of retardation (i.e., needing a more minor level of support than those with severe mental retardation). Also, because some of the studies discussed in this book were conducted before the new AAMR definition of mental retardation was approved, it is necessary to refer to the formerly used categories in order to accurately reflect the data.

## Acknowledgments

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I am so grateful to many people who contributed to the development of this second edition of *Life Beyond the Classroom*. There are many colleagues with whom I have worked and from whom I have learned and benefited while developing this book. It is difficult to know where to start, insofar as there are so many who have very much influenced my work. This is actually the third transition-related book with which I have been involved: *Transition from School to Work* was published in 1988, and the first edition of *Life Beyond the Classroom* followed in 1992. I mention this because there are a number of people who have been involved in these projects who have helped to shape my thinking.

I am blessed to work with some wonderful people at the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment at Virginia Commonwealth University. Some of these people have strongly influenced the direction of my writing; they include Dr. Katherine Inge, Dr. Michael D. West, Dr. John Kregel, Dr. Wendy Parent, Pam Sherron, Vicki Brooke, Mike Barcus, Grant Revell, and Karen Flippo. They have helped to give me insight into the future direction of transition for young people with disabilities. In addition, I am grateful to Elizabeth Evans Getzel, Patricia Brown-Glover, Christine Hess, Susan Lehmann Griffin, Stacy Dymond, and Cary Griffin for their contributions to this book. They have greatly enriched this effort.

In addition to this important group of people, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge leaders in the transition and disability fields at large who have helped to provide the foundation for many of the chapters in this book: Rebecca McDonald, David Mank, Lou Brown, Rud and Ann Turnbull, Ernie Pancsofar, Marty Agran, Susan Hasazi, Michael Wehmeyer, Jim Patton, Wendy Wood, Sherril Moon, Jane Everson, Frank and Janis Rusch, Edna Syzmanski, Sharon DeFur, Teresa Grossi, Margo Izzo, and Katina Karoulis, for example, immediately come to mind in considering the significant effects of their work on this book. There are many others who have also published excellent work and who work in the field in an outstanding fashion. Although it is impossible to recognize everyone by name, they have helped shape my thinking as well.

The next group of people I feel compelled to acknowledge are the parents, individuals with disabilities, and advocates who have continually shown us the way in terms of their wishes, demands, requests, and so forth. They have asked us as professionals to be responsive to their needs. I only wish that more of us could be more responsive and hear them more clearly.

Finally, I acknowledge Jeanne Dalton for typing and guiding the technical development of the manuscript for this book. She has spent hundreds of hours helping me improve this book by tracking down references and permission releases and communicating with contributors on my behalf. I could not have completed either the first or second edition of this book without her willing and positive help, especially in providing me with chapter after chapter of clean manuscript.

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