



Empowering Students Through College Transition Plans: Increasing Access to Postsecondary Degree, Credential and Certificate Programs

By:

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Project Overview



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Many students plan to pursue a college degree, certificate or credential after completing high school. The transition between high school and postsecondary education requires multiple steps, including determining career goals, selecting where to go, navigating the application process and securing funding to cover tuition and other expenses. Some subgroups of students find navigating these processes particularly challenging, including those from low-income backgrounds, in the foster care system, experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity and students who will be the first in their family to attend college. Even academically prepared students may struggle without the personalized guidance as they prepare for the transition to life after high school.

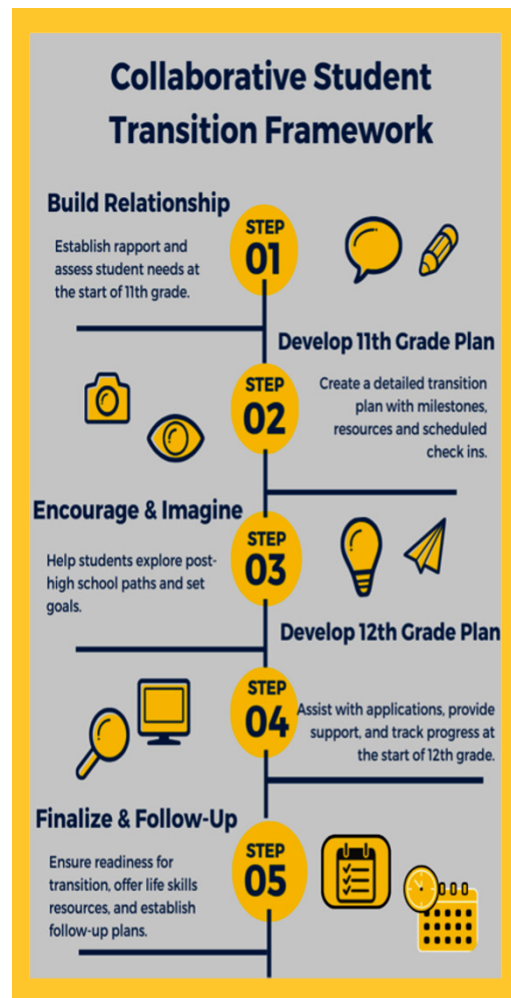
Educators continue to look for resources that can be integrated into their college preparation programming. We recommend transition plans, which enable educators to guide students in articulating goals, identifying potential challenges, accessing resources and taking consistent steps toward turning their goals into reality. Transition plans allow for tailored strategies that recognize each student's strengths and challenges. This collaborative and holistic process enables educators to co-create personalized plans with students. The process empowers students to pursue postsecondary opportunities confidently. This proactive approach can begin in 11th grade or earlier. Through the integration of transition plans into existing support systems, educators and community partners can create opportunities for all students to learn about and be supported in the college transition process.

What is A Transition Plan?

A transition plan is a structured process of collaborating with students to discuss future aspirations and gathering the information needed to successfully achieve those goals. Transition planning is a proactive approach to prepare students for life beyond high school that focuses on their educational, vocational and personal goals. The process involves identifying resources, setting achievable milestones and ensuring ongoing support as students transition to life after high school. Transition plans offer a sense of direction and security by addressing both immediate and long-term needs. Students have a sense of agency by taking an active role in shaping their futures. The process is designed to be flexible, adaptable to each student's circumstance and focused on sustainable outcomes.

We developed a Collaborative Student Transition Framework, which provides guidance for a joint decision-making process between students, counselors and others in their support network. Educators build relationships with students in order to have honest conversations about their goals and challenges. In 11th grade, the plan focuses on the student's goals and initial steps to prepare for life after high school. For students without clear goals, educators can help them explore possibilities.

The 12th grade plan focuses on solidifying goals and identifying specific tasks that need to be completed as they transition out of high school. Once students have a completed plan and graduate from high school, they may need continued support. In particular, the summer between high school graduation and the start of college can be a particularly difficult time when students need to make final decisions or complete important paperwork. They often do not have an advisor at the college who they know and trust — so students often rely on high school educators during this key transition point.



Who Supports Students in Using Transition Plans?

The college transition planning tool could be integrated into different ways within and outside of a high school to support students. An ideal situation would include having the planning process integrated into multiple spaces where students regularly engage and have educators collaborate across those spaces to support students. For example, the homeroom teacher could create regular time for students to work on parts of the plan while the English teaching staff includes a writing activity related to exploring future goals and the college preparation classes/programs have time dedicated to learning about different careers and postsecondary institutions. The school and/or district administrators could facilitate the collaborative process. We suggest a few spaces where the plans could be used; however, there are likely many others:

- ⇒ High school guidance counselors could incorporate transition plans within their college support programming. Students would fill out a draft of the transition plan prior to meeting with the counselor to facilitate a more productive conversation about preparing for life after high school.
- ⇒ College preparation teachers could integrate the transition plans into their classes or programming.
- ⇒ A school or district may decide to adopt college transition plans as an overarching strategy to support the academic success of all students. A designated district representative could serve as an additional resource for educators, families and students.
- ⇒ Community partners (e.g., afterschool programs, religious organizations or college preparation groups) who support students in transitioning to college could integrate transition plans into their work.
- ⇒ Family members, guardians or other important individuals within a student's network could also be involved in the process. Some students may have close relationships with their parents or guardians and want to have those individuals be part of their planning process. Other students may not be connected with family members.
- ⇒ We recommend making sure that both the student and the educator providing support have a copy of the transition plan. Students experiencing homelessness frequently move – sometimes within little notice. They may lose contact with the educator and would benefit from having a structured outline of how to keep moving forward. And educators should keep a copy because students may misplace the document.



How Could Transition Plans Be Used in Practice?

Educators and trusted adults can create a supportive environment where students feel heard and valued. The transition planning tool is designed to encourage open communication and ensure that the planning process is student-centered. The appendices to this document include specific guidance for using both the 11th and 12th grade transition plans. In addition, we provide some general guidelines for using the plans:

- ⇒ Students will be at different stages in identifying goals and strategies for being successful as they transition out of high school. Some students will have a clear vision of their goals while others may need more support in exploring the possibilities. The transition plans help both the student and educators to understand where the gaps in knowledge are for each student.
- ⇒ Empower students throughout the process. Involve students in the decision-making and encourage them to take ownership of their transition plans. Provide them with the tools and resources they need to make informed choices about their futures.
- ⇒ Incorporate flexibility into the support programming. Transition plans should be adaptable to address students changing circumstances, emerging needs and adjustments in future goals. Regularly review and update the plan to ensure it remains relevant and supportive. Leverage community resources throughout the process. Connect students with local organizations and services that can offer additional support, such as housing assistance, mental health services and college preparation programs.
- ⇒ Focus on students' strengths. Help students understand how their previous experiences, personality and many other strengths can be a foundation for building their transition plan. For students who may be struggling personally or academically, assist them in recognizing their potential and feel more confident about their future.
- ⇒ In the appendices, we provide more detailed guidance about how to use the tool and provide recommendations related to specific aspects of the process.

We developed templates to provide guidance for educators, administrators, community partners, families and others who may decide to use the plans. However, we encourage schools, districts and community agencies to explore how to customize these tools to reflect their students' needs. A team of teachers, administrators, community partners, students and/or families could review the templates and use them as a starting point to build a transition planning process.

What are the Benefits of Transition Plans?

In addition to the aforementioned benefits of integrating transition plans into high school programming for students, we highlight additional reasons why educators may decide to leverage this tool:

- **Supporting students who experience challenges accessing college** — While transition plans benefit all students, they also have the potential to increase college-going for students from low-income backgrounds, those who will be the first in their families to attend college, and other subgroups of students who typically experience challenges navigating the process (e.g., those in foster care or experiencing housing insecurity). For these students, transition plans can incorporate targeted support to help students navigate hurdles on their path to earning a college degree and certificate. Creating a pathway to college may also positively influence students' motivation to fully engage in high school, which could influence how their engagement and outcomes. For schools looking to improve graduation rates, incorporating transition plans into their programming could be an aspect of their overall strategy.
- **Targeting guidance** — Many low-income and first-generation college students have a difficult time navigating college preparation and transition, including determining which college to attend, deciphering financial aid options, figuring out housing and navigating the many other steps in process. A personalized approach clarifies complex processes and ensures every student is aware of the resources and options available.
- **Enhancing support systems** — By building well-rounded and collaborative support networks, educators offer the comprehensive care necessary for students to thrive both academically and personally. A transition plan can help students connect with specialized services (e.g., including

mentoring programs, mental health resources and community-based assistance) that could positively influence their engagement in high school and likelihood of attending college.

- **Incorporating holistic approach** — Using a holistic approach works to ensure that each student has a personalized transition plan that considers their goals, strengths, background, potential challenges and other aspects of their situation that could influence college-going.
- **Leveraging a strength-based and iterative support** — While students may have challenges that need to be addressed, approaches that only focus on these obstacles often reinforce student's beliefs that they would not be successful in college. A strengths-based approach begins by identifying goals, skills, talents, relationships and other aspects of the student or their network that could be leveraged to encourage success. The transition plan is designed to encourage an iterative process of self-reflection and goal refinement, which enables students to continuously adjust and improve their transition plans as they refine their future plans.
- **Allowing for flexibility** — Students may need additional time, and tailored steps may be necessary to accommodate their unique goals, challenges and circumstances. This can be particularly important for students who will be the first in their families to attend college. Flexibility ensures students can move at a pace that reflects their individual needs.

In the appendices that follow, we provide [templates](#) with embedded guidance for educators working with students. We also have transition plan templates on our website, which educators could share with students, families and community partners.



Appendix A: Practitioner Guiding Questions — Junior Year

This appendix provides guidance for educators who plan to utilize transition plans to support their students. [A template is also available](#) that can be shared with students. Depending upon the school context, the template could be modified to reflect the needs of your students.

Practitioner Guiding Questions: Junior Year
Student Name:
Educator Name:

Student Reflection Prompt
The top five most important things to me right now are....

Transition Plan Overview

Section 1
Education

Section 2
Employment

Section 3
Housing

Section 4
Wellness &
Self-care

Section 5
Community,
Connection &
Support

Section 6
Life Skills &
Other Needs

Education Plan

Section 1 Overview: This section gives you an opportunity to identify educational goals and resources to support your academic achievement

Driver's License/State ID	Taken the ACT and/or SAT Exams? Yes or No
Birth Certificate	Visited Colleges? Yes or No
Social Security Card	Have you met with a counselor to ensure you are meeting requirements for college admission? Yes or No
Health Insurance Card	Have you participated in college preparation activities? Yes or No
Medical History/Immunization Records	List your top 5 colleges/technical schools?
Copy of School Transcripts	
Information Required for FAFSA & Other Scholarships	



Tips to Consider:

- **Encourage** students to think about what matters most to them both inside and outside of the school.
- **Assist** with scheduling and preparing any necessary standardized tests or application deadlines.
- **Review** the student's academic record to identify any gaps or areas where additional support might be needed.
- **Regularly check** on the student's emotional and mental readiness to graduate.

Employment Plan	
<p>Section 2 Overview: This section encourages you to explore career interests, prepare for job searches and understand employment opportunities.</p>	
<p>Employment Reflection: Reflect on your skills and abilities by considering what you enjoy doing and where you excel. How can these talents translate into employment opportunities?</p>	
Housing Plan	
<p>Section 3 Overview: This section focuses on planning for stable and secure housing, including understanding rental processes and creating contingency plans.</p>	
<p>Things to Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where do I live now? • What is my planned end date for my current housing? • Do I have a backup housing plan? • What are my short-term (one year) housing goals? <p>In case of emergency, I will go.....</p>	
Wellness & Self-Care Plan	
<p>Section 4 Overview: This section gives you a chance to reflect on maintaining physical and mental health through regular check-ups, insurance coverage and healthy lifestyle choices.</p>	
<p>Wellness Checklist:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirm your current health insurance provider and policy number • Make a list of your current prescriptions • Find out if your insurance will continue to cover these prescriptions and for how long. • Identify supportive individuals who can help you stay healthy and attend medical appointments. • Other important resources 	<p>If I do not have these materials, how can I get them?</p>



Tips to Consider:

- **Guide** the student in researching part-time job opportunities or internships that align with their career interests.
- **Discuss** the different types of housing options available after graduation, including residence halls, independent living, staying with family and finding a roommate.
- **Help students** identify their personal support system and how to access those individuals during challenging times.
- **Encourage** the student to develop a portfolio or resume highlighting their skills and experiences.

Community, Connection & Support	
<p>Section 5 Overview: This section focuses on the importance of your community, peer connections and support systems in providing a sense of belonging and helping you navigate your goals during and after high school.</p>	
<p>Reflection: Who in your school, family, peer group or community can you turn to for support when you need advice or encouragement?</p> 	
Life Skills & Other Needs	
<p>Section 6 Overview: This section allows you to reflect on important life skills such as financial management, time management and effective communications.</p>	
<p>Things to Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are my current nutrition habits? Do I know how to do laundry? How is my personal hygiene? Do I know how to make a budget? How can those close to me help me learn important life skills? 	
<p>Before my high school graduation, I will do the following:</p> 	<p>Tasks for educator or others to complete:</p>



Tips to Consider:

- Discuss** student's ability to get support from family and any potential challenges that may exist.
- Help** the student identify extracurricular activities or community groups that align with their interests and values.
- Consider** suggesting ways the student can involve trusted family members, guardians, community members or close friends in planning their transition to college.
- Consider** guiding the student in developing a budget for managing expenses and saving for future goals.

Notes Section:	Important Contact Information	
	Name	Phone Number/Email
	Parent/Guardian	
	Emergency Contact	
	School Counselor	
	Teacher/Mentor	
	Close Friend/Peer Support	
	Doctor/Healthcare Provider	
	Community Resource (e.g., youth shelter, hotline)	
	Work/Employer Contact	
	Transportation Help	
	Other Trusted Adult	
Questions I have for the next time we meet:		



Tips to Consider:

- **Help** the student identify individuals who can serve as professional references, such as teachers, employers, mentors and community members. Ensure the student has updated contact information for each person.
- **Schedule** regular follow-ups to monitor the student's transition progress and provide ongoing support.
- **Provide resources** related to local mental health providers or counselors the student can contact if they experience stress or anxiety.
- **Encourage** students experiencing housing insecurity to add contact information for organizations that support youth homelessness, including drop-in centers and advocacy groups.

Appendix B: Practitioner Guiding Questions — Senior Year

This appendix provides guidance for educators who plan to utilize transition plans to support their students. [A template is also available](#) that can be shared with students. Depending upon the school context, the template could be modified to reflect the needs of your students.

Practitioner Guiding Questions: Senior Year					
Student Name: Educator Name:					
Student Reflection: Where do I see myself in....					
6 Months:					
1 Year:					
5 Years:					
Transition Plan Overview					
Section 1 Education	Section 2 Employment	Section 3 Housing	Section 4 Wellness & Self Care	Section 5 Community, Connection & Support	Section 6 Life Skills & Other Needs
How Ready Do I Feel to Graduate High School?					
Circle One:		Explain why you chose your rating:			
1. Unsure if I will graduate					
2. I am not prepared to graduate					
3. I am feeling somewhat prepared, but have specific concerns.					
4. I am on my way to becoming prepared to graduate					
5. I am completely prepared to graduate					
		Date: _____			



Tips to Consider:

- **Ask** students to consider the steps they could take to achieve short-term and long-term goals. How do their current interests and experiences align with their future goals?
- **Identify** any external pressures or challenges the student may be facing that could impact their ability to successfully transition to life after high school.
- **Regularly check** on the student's emotional and mental readiness to graduate.

Education Plan	
Section 1 Overview: This section focuses on identifying your educational goals and resources to support your academic achievement.	
Education Checklist: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Drivers License/State ID ○ Birth Certificate ○ Social Security Card ○ Health Insurance Card ○ Medical History/Immunization Records ○ Copy of school transcripts ○ Information required for FAFSA & Other Scholarships 	Have you done the following? <p>Taken the ACT and/or SAT Exams: Yes or No</p> <p>Visited Colleges: Yes or No</p> <p>Completed FAFSA: Yes or No</p> <p>Have you met with a counselor to ensure you are meeting requirements for college admission: Yes or No</p> <p>Been part of college preparation activities: Yes or No</p> <p>Listed your top 3-5 colleges/technical schools?</p>
Employment Plan	
Section 2 Overview: This section helps you explore career interests, prepare for job searches, and understanding employment opportunities.	
Employment Reflection: Reflect on your skills and abilities by considering what you enjoy doing and where you excel. How can these talents translate into employment opportunities?	



Tips to Consider:

- **Review** the student's academic record to identify any gaps or areas where additional academic support might be needed.
- **Assist** with schedule and preparing for standardized tests or application deadlines.
- **Encourage** participation in local job fairs or networking events. Provide information about these opportunities to students.
- **Encourage** students to develop a portfolio and/or resume highlighting their skills and experiences.

Housing Plan	
Section 3 Overview: This section encourages you to plan for stable and secure housing, including understanding rental processes and creating contingency plans	
Things to consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Where do I live now? ○ What is my planned end date for my current housing? ○ Do I have a backup housing plan? ○ What are my short-term (1-year) housing goals? ○ What factors are important to me in choosing housing (cost, roommates, transportation)? 	
In case of an emergency, I will go...	
Wellness & Self-Care Plan	
Section 4 Overview: This section highlights the importance of maintaining your physical and mental health through regular check-ups, insurance coverage, and healthy lifestyle choices.	
Wellness Checklist: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Confirm your current health insurance provider and policy number. ○ Make a list of your current prescriptions. ○ Find out if your insurance will continue to cover these prescriptions and for how long. ○ Identify supportive individuals who can help you stay healthy and attend medical appointments ○ Other important wellness and self-care tasks or resources 	If I do not have these materials how can I get them?



Tips to Consider:

- **Discuss** the potential financial and logistical challenges of different housing options.
- **Evaluate** if the student has any unmet health needs or barriers to accessing care.
- **Share** resources on stress management strategies, such as mindfulness apps and local wellness workshops.
- **Discuss** strategies for maintaining a balanced lifestyle, including managing stress and time.

Community, Connections & Support	
<p>Section 5 Overview: This section focuses on the role of family, peer groups, and support systems in providing the guidance and encouragement you need as you transition out of high school.</p>	
<p>Identity Reflection: As you transition out of high school, what steps can you take to build stronger connections with your family, peers, and support systems to help you achieve your future goals?</p>	
Life Skills & Other Needs	
<p>Section 6 Overview: This section covers essential life skills you will need after high school such as financial management, time management, and effective communication.</p>	
<p>Things to Consider:</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="width: 45%;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What are my current nutrition habits? ○ Do I know how to do laundry? ○ How is my personal hygiene? ○ Do I know how to make a budget? </div> <div style="width: 45%;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Do I have information about applying for Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) or other forms of food support? ○ How can those close to me help me learn important life skills? </div> </div>	
<p>Before my high school graduation, I will do the following:</p>	<p>Tasks for educator or others to complete:</p>



Tips to Consider:

- **Encourage** the student to strengthen family connections through regular check-ins, shared activities or discussing ways they can support one another.
- **Consider** suggesting ways the student can involve trusted family members or close friends in planning their transition to ensure consistent support.
- **Provide** information about local community or cultural organizations.
- **Assess** the student's proficiency in essential life skills and identify areas for improvement.
- **Discuss** the importance of staying connected to supportive networks after high school graduation.

Notes Section:	
Questions I have for the next time we meet:	
Important Names & Contact Information:	
Parent/Guardian	
Emergency Contact	
School Counselor	
Teacher/Mentor	
Close Friend/Peer Support	
Doctor/Healthcare Provider	
Community Resource (e.g., youth shelter, hotline)	
Work/Employer Contact	
Transportation Help	
College admissions representative	
Workplace mentors or internship supervisor	
Other Trusted Adults	



Tips to Consider:

- **Consider** helping the student identify individuals who can serve as professional references, such as teachers, employers or mentors, and ensure they have their updated contact.
- **Schedule** regular follow-ups to monitor the student's transition progress and provide ongoing support.
- **Provide** resources on local mental health providers or school-based counselors the student can contact if they experience stress or anxiety.
- **Encourage** the student to add contact information for organizations that support youth experiencing homelessness, such as local drop-in centers or advocacy groups.
- **Trusted adults could include:** Encourage the student to add contact information for organizations that support youth experiencing homelessness, such as local drop-in centers or advocacy groups

Authors



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William Woelki is a PhD candidate in the Human Development and Family Sciences program at the University of Delaware. His research focuses on improving post-secondary outcomes for youth with foster care experience (YFCE) and addressing housing instability through a youth-centered lens. Grounded in participatory research methodologies, his work emphasizes equitable research partnerships that elevate lived experience and inform policy and practice to advance educational and housing equity.

About the Pullias Center for Higher Education

Promoting Equity in Higher Education

The world's leading research center on student access and success in higher education, the Pullias Center for Higher Education advances equity in higher education and provides innovative, scalable solutions to both improve college outcomes for underserved students and to enhance the performance of postsecondary institutions. The Pullias Center is located within the USC Rossier School of Education.



Suggested citation: Hallett, R. E., & Woelki, W. T. (2025). *Empowering Students Through College Transition Plans: Increasing Access to Postsecondary Degree, Credential and Certificate Programs*. Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California.