Chapter Nine

Threshold Then and Now: The Evolution of Lesley's Transition Program for Young Adults with Disabilities

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In 1981, at a time when there were few options after high school for young adults with disabilities, Lesley boldly showed initiative and supported the development of Threshold, an innovative transition program that 29 years later would still be proudly preparing students with significant special needs for work, community integration, and lifelong learning.

Social Context

Transition was a newly emerging term in the early 1980s. Chapter 766, the Massachusetts law guaranteeing a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with special needs, had been passed just a few years before in 1974, followed even more recently by its federal equivalent, Public Law 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act. Despite the great step forward in special education represented by these pieces of legislation, their impact was initially limited largely to elementary and middle schools or to programs for children with varying levels of retardation (Grossman, 1983). The ongoing needs of older youth with disabilities went virtually unaddressed for several more years until educators and policy makers finally began to recognize that most disabling conditions persist into adolescence and that many are never outgrown at all. Only then did they acknowledge the associated lifelong challenges and mandate that long-term goals extending beyond the high school years be addressed in the Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) of secondary-school special education students with both severe and moderate disabilities (Sitlington and Frank, 1990). A major turning point occurred in 1984, when Madeline Wills, Assistant Secretary for the US Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), wrote her seminal "Bridges" paper (Wills, 1984) and propelled the transition movement into federal policy. Although Wills, like her predecessors, described transition in narrow, job-related terms as "an outcome-oriented process encompassing a broad array of services and experiences that lead to employment" (p.1), when she added that "success in social, personal, leisure, and other adult roles enhances opportunities both to obtain employment *and enjoy its benefits"* (emphasis added) (p.1), she paved the way for a broader discussion of transition. Picking up on this new line of thinking, Halpern (1985) wrote that "living successfully in one's community should be the primary target of transitional services" (p.480), a perspective that opened the door to a more holistic approach toward transition that validated the thinking behind the Threshold model, then several years old.

Despite the federal mandate from OSERS, few public schools adopted the comprehensive approach that would foster development of the full range of skills needed for entry into the adult world. The dearth of services seemed all too apparent when

Halpern (1985) conducted a survey of the entire population of teachers and administrators in Oregon along with a stratified random sample of parents about transition practices in that state's schools. The study's 90% response rate, which led the authors to believe the results could be generalized, suggested that although 9 out of 10 high schools offered instruction to pupils with disabilities, fewer than 50% of those students "actually received instruction in such important areas as vocational preparation, functional academics, home living skills, and community living skills" (p .483). At least half of the Oregon teachers cited a need for more vocational preparation and community living instruction. These results suggest there was a need that was not being met, despite the federal government's directive for transition programming.

Even those programs that did exist in the 1980s tended to be limited in scope, focusing largely on development of vocational skills. As a result, high school graduates with LD and other special needs who had not had access to any independent living training were significantly delayed in their ability to achieve independence and tended to live at home with their parents longer than their peers without LD (Haring, Lovett, & Smith, 1990). Moreover, even with vocational training, few were able to earn anything more than minimum wage (Edgar, 1987) and successfully support their move from school to community. Thus, the prospects for life beyond high school for students with special needs were severely limited; good programming was clearly needed.

The Lesley Context

Threshold was launched in the fall of 1982, during a period when the Graduate School was highly entrepreneurial and particularly welcoming of creative innovation. A phone call from an eager parent of a would-be student in the Fall of 1981 mobilized then-assistant professor Dr. Arlyn Roffman to apply for funding to disseminate the model of the Para-Educator Program at New York University (NYU), a vocational training program targeted to young adults with severe LD, to other colleges around the country. As a member of the Graduate School faculty, Roffman approached Dean Richard Wylie for support of her plan to make the bold move to significantly expand upon the NYU model and create the first *comprehensive* campus-based postsecondary transition program in the nation.

Initial funding provided by the Para-Educator Foundation and the Foundation for Children with Learning Disabilities (now the National Center for Learning Disabilities) supported Threshold through the first two years to the point when it would be fully populated and financially self-sustaining. The target was emotionally stable young adults aged 18-26 with severe learning disabilities and low-average cognitive functioning whose test scores on standardized tests of intelligence ranged from 75-90 and whose basic skills were at least at 4th grade level. This population of students had up to this point been sorely underserved; too high functioning for sheltered workshops but too challenged by the academic demands of typical college degree programs, they had historically "fallen through the cracks" and had had little opportunity to reach their full potential. The program aimed to serve those who met the above criteria and who had both the desire to live an independent life and the drive to work hard to achieve their goals.

Basing this non-degree program at a college was an innovation in itself. At the time of Threshold's inception, when higher education was increasingly being viewed as

the normative path for high school graduates in America, few youth with severe special needs dared dream that they could step forward with their peers into postsecondary life. By basing Threshold on a university campus, participating students would have the opportunity to have the *normalized experience* (Wolfensberger, 1972) of attending college while building the practical skills needed for working and living independently. They would take their courses in campus classrooms, eat in the college's dining facility, have access to the library and gym, and be able to participate in many campus clubs and social functions.

Model: What the Program Would Look Like

The Threshold model was designed to prepare its students to become independent, responsible, productive working citizens. Its holistic approach would help students prepare for all aspects of adult life through a comprehensive program including vocational education, preparation for independent living, social skills training and other psycho-social supports, and development of leisure time interests and skills.

Vocational Training

Through course work and 15-18 hours of supervised fieldwork each week, students would prepare for paraprofessional positions in one of two majors, Early Childhood or Human Services. The first year would be a career exploration year, allowing students to study and experience the two majors for a semester each, followed by a second year, during which they would solely concentrate on the one that best fit their interests and abilities. The vocational portion of the program would focus on both general job readiness and skills specific to the need of the vocational majors. Thus, students would learn prevocational skills, such as how to search for employment (e.g. preparing a resume, interviewing) and job-specific skills related to child or elderly care. In addition to an on-site supervisor, each student would be assigned a Threshold vocational advisor who would meet with him or her on campus, visit the field placement for observations, and consult with the on-site supervisor regarding student progress.

Independent Living

The independent living component of the program would prepare students for community life. A series of courses would focus on such practicalities as money management (e.g. banking and budgeting); apartment living skills (e.g. meal planning and preparation, cleaning); sexuality; and daily living (e.g. personal hygiene and medical self-care.

Psycho-Social Supports and Course Work

Psychological support would be offered both formally, through weekly therapeutic small-group meetings with a licensed psychologist, and informally, through mentoring by faculty and staff. Social skills training would be provided through a weekly

course, and its lessons would be reinforced ecologically throughout the program - in classes, in the residence halls, and at the field placements.

Leisure Time Skills

Students would be helped to plan satisfying and productive use of their leisure time. Electives in writing, drama, and fine arts would promote development of their creativity, and support would be offered by mentors and by residence staff as they independently managed their free hours.

Implementation: How the Model was put into Effect

In late winter of 1981 a flyer was mailed to Boston-area high schools announcing the opening of Threshold and welcoming applications. Since campus housing was not made immediately available to Threshold, the first applicants anticipated being commuters. When 30 applications were submitted for the 18 openings in the pioneer cohort - reflecting a clear demand for the innovative transition programming being introduced - the campus opened a 10-bed residence hall for women; the men lived in private apartments near campus. The next year, with the admission of a second cohort of 18, the number of beds increased significantly, and establishment of a small men's dorm made it possible for male students too to experience residential life.

Transition/Bridge

During Threshold's second year in operation, it became apparent that although students had acquired many important work and community skills during their two years on campus, they would benefit from additional support as they made the adjustment from their campus-based program to mainstream community life. A $100,000 grant from the Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust backed the development of the Transition Year Program, which would provide post-graduate assistance and skills reinforcement as graduates moved into the community and embarked upon their independent adult lives. During the Transition Year, students would benefit from the services of an Independent Living Advisor, who would help them find apartments in the Cambridge area and who would visit them for 100 hours over the course of their first 12 months beyond graduation to help them apply the skills learned during the two-year program. A Vocational Advisor would guide them through the job-search process and support both them and their employer as they adjusted to their first paid position. In addition, a weekly seminar would bring them back to campus for additional course work related to "real-world" issues and skills.

The Transition Year Program quickly became the option of choice for 75% of Threshold graduates. Thus, for most students, Threshold became a 3-year experience. Although at one point there was serious consideration of lengthening the program to incorporate a third year for all, it was determined that this would be make the program prohibitively expensive for some and would not fit the needs of the few who, after two years, were still not quite ready for community life. To address the needs of this small group of graduates, a Bridge Year was developed. This intensive, individualized program

was designed to be a half-step toward independence; students would still live in Threshold residence halls but would work more hours in internships and receive additional training to help them achieve readiness for the Transition Year.

Campus Life

Threshold became a largely residential program. Although the goal was always to integrate students to the fullest degree possible on campus, the particular special needs of the Threshold population necessitated more residential supports than were available in mainstream Lesley housing. Thus, from the program's first years, Threshold students have been housed in separate Lesley residence halls, allowing them to benefit from additionally trained residence staff and supplemental structure to support the development of their independent living skills and their social growth.

Despite the separate dorms, Threshold resident students have been well-included in campus life, eating in Lesley's dining halls, enjoying full access to the university library and fitness facilities, participating in the Lesley College student governance, Unity Choir, theater productions and other mainstream clubs, and playing weekend basketball games along with Lesley undergraduates and Threshold alumni at the neighborhood elementary school. They have also benefited from a comprehensive schedule of Threshold-specific programming, the highlight being the semi-formal dance, attended by scores of current students and alumni, who return year after year.

The Evolution of the Model

Over the past three decades, Threshold has evolved to meet the changing needs of its students and to respond to changing times. Its dedicated faculty and administration - the majority of whom have worked at the program for over fifteen years - provide a long-term perspective that has enabled them to be particularly sensitive to evolving patterns of student needs. In response to workplace and technological changes that have had the potential to impact students and graduates, they have implemented a variety of modifications to the program.

Vocational Training

Among those changes have been a number of alterations to the original vocational offerings at Threshold, including several modifications of the majors.

Although the initial goal for graduates majoring in Early Childhood was qualification for jobs as aides in nursery schools and day care settings, it soon became clear that a significant percentage were capable of assuming a higher level of responsibility in childcare, many as teachers. For a time, those who were interested in becoming fully qualified as early childhood teachers had to turn to other institutions to earn the necessary credits; however, by the early 1990's six college credits in either major could be earned right at Threshold, and the program's early childhood curriculum and practicum experiences officially fulfilled the Massachusetts requirements for Early Childhood Teacher qualification. Since that time, although not all students majoring in

early childhood have been ready to assume a position as a teacher upon graduation, licensure qualifies them to grow into that role.

The career exploration year was altered within the first decade. Although the original concept of structured exposure to two vocational fields was sound and effective - often students who had applied to Threshold expecting to major in one area discovered through their own observations as well as their supervisors' that the alternate major would be a better match to their interests and talents - the challenge was that every year there were students for whom *neither* Early Childhood *nor* Human Services was an appropriate career match**.** Although not well suited for such heavily people-oriented fields, these individuals had the potential to thrive in other career paths. Responding to the vocational needs of this subset of students, the vocational portion of the program was expanded to include a Clerical Services major, which offered hands-on training in office skills. Subsequently, when interest in Human Services declined over the years, that major was dropped, and Clerical Services joined Early Childhood as the second vocational option for the career exploration year.

Ever alert to changes in the work world, Threshold faculty continued to modify the new major to be responsive to current job demands and work availability. Office environments were themselves evolving, as new computer technologies were revolutionizing the workplace. When the Clerical Services major was first designed, entry-level business positions, such as mailroom clerks and file clerks, were plentiful, but these jobs became a relative rarity as computer usage grew more prevalent. As a result, the major was renamed "Business Support Services" and expanded to provide training for other jobs in addition to office work, in such diverse business-based positions as retail sales and stocking; university and/or hospital food service delivery; and patient transport or escort services in healthcare settings.

There have been unanticipated benefits to adding the new major to the program. First, there was a notable effect on the applicant pool, with a marked increase in applications from qualified males, whose numbers grew from 20% to 50% by the program's third decade. This change could perhaps be attributable to gender stereotypes about the early childhood and human services fields, which are too often viewed as "women's work;" for those subscribing to this line of thinking, the addition of Business Support Services may have provided a more gender-neutral vocational option, making Threshold more attractive to both men and women. A second continuing benefit of adding this major is that the training it provides in keyboarding, word processing, email, and responsible use of the Internet has improved the communication skills of all students -regardless of their career track - with invaluable additional applicability in their day-to-day lives.

Independent Living

Program staff have developed and refined an Orientation to help new students adjust to their enlarging world, including the Threshold and Lesley communities, the Cambridge and Harvard Square neighborhoods, and the Greater Boston environs**.** Orientation has been designed to help students ease into the level of independence offered within the program, and topics have ranged from an introduction to the work

world to lessons on being safe in an urban environment, from instruction on how to use Boston's public transit to hands-on workshops on using Laundromats.

A series of practical courses developed to prepare students for community living has been refined over the years to address emerging issues. For example, Sexuality, which always covered such topics as reproduction and decision-making, was adapted by the mid 1980s to include the topic of HIV/AIDS. A course in Computer Safety was added by the early 2000s to help students navigate the Internet responsibly.

The Medical World course, designed to help students manage their own health care, began to address obesity and nutrition in greater depth when those topics emerged as increasingly prevalent health issues.

Apartment Living, the course designed to teach how to live independently, has changed over time as well. As they have since the program began, students continue to learn about leases and paying bills, cooking and grocery shopping, living safely and cooperatively with roommates, and utilizing the resources available within their urban community; however, when a two-week dorm-based apartment experience that had been established early in the program as a lab for independent living ultimately proved less than optimal, it was replaced by a weekly Food Lab. This workshop provides second-year students more weekly hands-on experience in the kitchen and the opportunity to focus intensively on meal planning and preparation, clean-up, and kitchen safety. Through sharing family recipes, students have also been encouraged to explore their culture and identity.

> *One student was able to connect with her Indian heritage by researching recipes that she had enjoyed in the past. She developed an association with a Lesley College student from a similar background and they worked together to make samosas and lassis. They adapted the recipes and shopped together to find authentic ingredients. Another student provided Lithuanian selections and described why and how the ingredients reflected that culture. A Peruvian recipe was important to a third student and helped him identify and describe his background.*

The Personal Finance course too changed over time. The need for explicit instruction and assistance in money management has been evident from the program's inception. It was clear early on that students would benefit from support as they learned the many facets of managing checking and savings accounts and the principles of sound budgeting (Roffman, 2000). Originally a requirement only for first-year students, this course was extended to four semesters to provide second-year students an opportunity to continue focusing on money management and consumer skills throughout the program. Recognizing that awareness of the news of the world further prepares individuals for community life, Threshold added a weekly Current Events class within the program's first few years. Designed to help students understand and keep abreast of major local, national, and world happenings, this course provides a forum to discuss timely issues. It is a particular point of pride that Threshold students have registered to vote and have participated in major elections since the early 1980s.

Psycho-Social Supports and Course Work

Young adults benefit from encouragement when embarking on new endeavors. This is especially true of Threshold students, whose disabilities frequently make the steps toward adulthood seem particularly formidable (Roffman, 2007). The psychological and social scaffolding provided within the program takes a variety of forms.

A Social Skills course helps students focus on increasing their interpersonal effectiveness with others by developing their social perception and general assertiveness. This course, too, has been refined with the times by adding emerging topics, such as cell phone etiquette, social networking, and the benefits and dangers involved in developing Internet relationships.

The Pathways to Health course was added in Threshold's third decade to help students learn about stress, including its causes, symptoms, and strategies for management. In this class students are helped to distinguish between the elements of their lives over which they do and do not have control and develop an Individualized Stress Management Profile, which focuses on identifying stress-reduction techniques to use as they contend with the issues they identify.

From the beginning, Threshold has been committed to helping students build upon their strengths and work around their areas of challenge. Many students arrive all too aware of what they *cannot* do and are not attuned to their individual "islands of competence" (Brooks, 2001), their unique set of strengths, skills, and positive attributes. To foster the awareness of their "islands," a course entitled Understanding Strengths and Challenges was added during the late 1980s. Designed to promote self-awareness and self-understanding, students learn the definitions, characteristics, types, and known causes of various disabilities. They identify their own learning styles and areas of difficulty and how these contribute to specific problems in their day-to-day lives. They then develop an Individualized Learning Profile that summarizes their strengths and weaknesses and lists strategies for capitalizing on the former and compensating for the latter. This information is shared with faculty, who are subsequently able to help each student employ his or her individualized list of strategies in all aspects of the program and to develop new tactics as needed. The Learning Profile is revisited and updated before students graduate, and students are coached to use it as a reference tool as they transition into work and community life (Yuan, 1994). In addition, students learn about their rights and responsibilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which stipulates that individuals with disabilities must self-disclose and self-advocate in order to access needed accommodations. To prepare them for this responsibility, the final exam for Understanding Learning Challenges requires students to explain their learning problems to others and demonstrate their ability to effectively use self-advocacy skills to request the accommodations they need to perform optimally on the job or in classroom settings. A study by Roffman, Herzog, & Wershba- Gerson (1994) validated the efficacy of this course and the carryover of self-understanding and self-advocacy into graduates' work and community lives.

Personal Growth is a weekly group led by a licensed psychologist to help students better understand themselves. Participants have an opportunity to speak candidly about issues of concern to them, to set and work on personal goals, and to discuss the responsibilities and challenges of young adulthood. As might be expected, issues raised

by students - always addressed with sensitivity - have changed with the times. Originally conducted as an open-ended group called Talk Session, this course has become more structured in recent years to focus on particularly pertinent areas relevant to personal growth. In addition to the classroom exercises that students experience in this course, meetings with program mentors and individual conferences with faculty all have the psychosocial benefit of encouraging students to identify, develop, and share their skills and interests.

> *One student resisted Threshold when he first arrived in the 1980s. He purposely separated himself from his peers during his first semester, did not take his work seriously, and refused to acknowledge either his learning disability or his severe hearing loss. It was not until he was placed in Human Services setting working with individuals with more extreme special needs that he found himself and realized that among his own "islands of competence" was an ability to offer this population understanding, empathy and patience. Gradually, he accepted his own learning challenges, stopped fighting his need for a hearing aid, and took full advantage of Threshold's offerings. After graduation he was hired as a counselor by a program for individuals with severe special needs and continues to thrive on the job, even being named "Employee of the Year' in 1996. Married to another Threshold graduate, with whom he has two children, he now recognizes that he has MANY "islands" and has confidence that along with his limitations he has great strengths.*

Leisure Time Skills

Most students arrive at Threshold longing for friends. Although some in each cohort reported having enjoyed a satisfying social life during their high school years, the majority did not share their positive experience. Some had managed to establish friendships in high school, only to be isolated at home; others had been marginalized at school and had suffered from pervasive and chronic loneliness throughout their childhood and teen years. Thus, development of social relationships has always ranked high on the priority lists of both students and the program faculty and administration. Residence staff members have worked along with faculty to facilitate students' participation in planned activities, to assist them in shaping unstructured leisure hours, and to help them weather the interpersonal challenges of dorm and program life.

The classes designed to foster development of leisure time pursuits have varied since the program first opened. At one point there was a course in dance, another in sewing. For the past two decades, students have had three options: Creative Writing, which produces a magazine each semester, with selections of work from all class members; Fine Arts, which offers an art show at a local gallery each year that showcases students' paintings, photography, and sculpture; and Theatre Project, which produces a dramatic performance for the Threshold community during the fall and spring semesters.

Threshold has always encouraged its students to be active and fit. Physical education courses have evolved over the years along with the expansion of Lesley's PE

facilities; a Saturday bowling league was popular for a time; and a weekend basketball game at the neighborhood school currently attracts students, alumni, and even, on a fairly regular basis, President Moore! Those with interest in sports on campus have been encouraged to join teams, which became more feasible when the door to involvement in intercollegiate sports opened in 2009. Until then, NCAA rules had prevented students in non-degree programs from competing on college athletic teams, and the only option for Threshold students seeking a team experience had been intramurals.

> *But when a particularly talented Threshold tennis player expressed interest in training and competing with the Lesley College team, the university contested the exclusion policy, the rule was waived, and the student was able to join the team in intercollegiate matches.*

Integration into other aspects of Lesley College extracurricular life has been possible when there has been a good fit between the ability and interest of a Threshold student and the activity itself.

> *Two Threshold students were soloists in a year-end performance of the Lesley chorus, and for a time several students worked tirelessly with the Lesley University dance team. These experiences not only helped Threshold students meld with their peers on campus; they also served to educate Lesley College students about the very real potential of young adults with disabilities.*

Students have additionally been encouraged to take advantage of the many available cultural, dining, and shopping opportunities within their reach in the Greater Boston area. Formal and informal activities have included visiting area museums, shopping in local malls, attending concerts, watching games in neighborhood sports bars, and attending live sporting events.

Evaluation of the Efficacy of the Threshold Program: Outcome Data

For nearly three decades - over the life of Threshold - there has been a continued commitment to formally documenting program outcomes, and much has been learned about its alumni. An initial study of the first four cohorts of graduates from 1984-87 (Posthill & Roffman, 1991) was followed by a study of outcomes for the first 12 cohorts (henceforth referred to as "the early group") through 1995 (Reisman, & Yuan, 1996), and in 2006 an additional study (Yuan, 2006) investigated how students in the subsequent 10 years of the program, 1996-2005, ("the later group") had fared. More recent research (Osten, 2009) was conducted to gather further information about the early group as they approached and reached middle age. In addition, an in-depth look at employment of Threshold graduates from the employers' perspective was conducted in 1996 (Osten & Noveck).

The studies all sought to take a comprehensive look at graduates' lives, investigating their progress in each of the four major domains of the program: vocational,

independent living, psychosocial adjustment, and use of leisure time. Beyond vocational status, their living patterns, independent living skills, personal growth, and use of support mechanisms were all investigated along with their level of satisfaction of various arenas of their lives,

Respondents in all of the follow-up studies had attended the core two-year Threshold program, and nearly 75% had also attended the program's Transition Year program. Comparing data across time, there is impressive consistency in what the numbers convey about the histories of adults who have graduated from Lesley's Threshold Program; the bottom line is that the group as a whole has fared well. As will be seen through the remainder of this chapter, despite ongoing challenges, there have also been many triumphs and successes.

Profile of Alumni

Threshold alumni are a diverse group. Consistent with the admissions criteria established when Threshold was founded, intelligence test scores have remained within the low-average range over the years. The mean Full Scale IQ of the earlier cohort was 81 (range = 65-109), mean Verbal Score was 85 (range = 63-114), mean Performance Score 78 (range =62 -122); the scores of the later group were remarkably similar. Standardized achievement test scores have consistently averaged 5th-6th grade in reading and 4th-5th grade in math.

In addition to their learning disabilities, the majority of Threshold students face physical challenges, including vision problems, seizure disorders, mobility limitations, and hearing impairments. Many have also been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Asperger Syndrome, and/or psychological conditions, such as mood disorders. The older graduates reported a significant increase in diagnoses of psychological conditions over time (almost double), particularly depression and bi-polar disorder and, as might be expected with aging, a similar jump in chronic medical conditions, particularly obesity and/or diabetes. An increase in diagnoses of Asperger Syndrome and Bi-polar Disorder among applicants and graduates in recent years is undoubtedly reflective of emerging awareness of these disorders among clinicians.

Despite the significant challenges they face, many Threshold students have demonstrated remarkable strengths, including character traits that have allowed them to persevere over the years and, in many cases, to succeed beyond the expectations envisioned when Threshold was founded.

> *One student, who was accepted from the wait list despite particularly low test scores, demonstrated intelligence not captured by standardized testing. From the day she entered the program, she displayed a unique understanding of children's needs and an extraordinary ability to foster their growth and development. She continued to grow throughout her training at Threshold and has successfully been employed as a teacher of young children for nearly twenty years.*

Living Patterns

Across studies, although approximately 25% of alumni returned to their hometowns following graduation, the 75% participating in the Transition Year resided in apartments in greater-Cambridge for at least the duration of the program and tended to remain in the Boston area for a long while. In fact, at least 60% of respondents still lived in the area 10 years after graduation. Like graduates of other local colleges and universities, Threshold alumni have found many reasons to remain in the Boston area; however, the decision to stay in the city has been especially compelling for this population, as doing so has afforded them the opportunity to enter a well-established, ever-growing social community comprised of earlier Threshold graduates - an important source of friends, roommates and life partners. Further, Boston's extensive and accessible public transit system has been freeing for the many who lack a driver's license or a car. An additional draw has been the opportunity for many graduates to continue in the positions they had secured during the Transition Year.

Across studies almost 45% of graduates reported having lived independently for at least a ten-year period after graduation. At the time of each of the research investigations, only 10-20% were living with parents; however, this does not tell the entire story, as 35- 50% of graduates had lived at home *at some point* post- graduation, depending on the cohort. For one third of the earlier group this was a temporary situation of less than 1 year due to ill health, apartment transitions, or transitions between jobs. An equal number of graduates had lived with parents for 1-3 years, and another third had lived in their parents' home more or less permanently, citing difficulty finding affordable housing, unemployment, lack of a roommate, need of family support, desire to be involved with family, or simply a wish to live at home.

Participation in the Transition Year after graduation seems to have increased the likelihood of living outside of the family home. Transition graduates lived independent of their parents 85% of the time in the first 10 years post-graduation, while those who had only completed the two-year program lived independent of their parents just 50% of the time.

In their first years after graduation, those who lived in apartments or condos tended to do so with roommates, but the 2008 study showed that as the group matured, only 17% lived with a roommate (most often with another Threshold graduate). One third lived alone, and 40% lived with a spouse and/or a child.

Relationship Status

Across studies, in the first 10 years post-graduation, fewer than 10% of graduates were married, and fewer than 1% had children; however, over time, that picture changed for the early group. By 2008, 37% were married (4% were divorced) or in a civil union. Among those who had married, 50% had wed another Threshold graduate, and 11% had one or more children.

A 2007 qualitative study by Yuan investigated the effect of having a learning disability on the marriages of 10 couples comprised of two Threshold graduates. Although there were instances of remarkable independence among some, it became clear that it is far from easy for most who become parents. One couple has two children with

hints of learning challenges of their own. The parents remember their own struggles and are fearful of their children being teased at school, as they were. "We knew there was a chance [that our children would have LD]. It's not like we're going to love our children any different. It's just going to be a challenge" (Yuan, in press).

A number of graduates live in multi-generational homes with their children and their parents. Additional support models are in place for others: one child with special needs is being raised by a graduate's parents; two graduates, including one with newborn twins, are living with their children and a parent; a third couple (both Threshold alumni) are getting significant outside help to raise their son who has autism. On the other hand, some have managed with little support.

> *One graduate had a child immediately after graduation from Threshold. A single parent, she raised her daughter while working as a day care teacher. She eventually became a day care director, and her daughter is now completing college.*

Independent Living

Developing independent living skills has been a central goal of Threshold. Graduates in each of the Threshold outcome studies were asked to evaluate their own functioning across a range of skill sets, and there was remarkable consistency in their self-assessments.

Money management. In the area of money management, more than two thirds reported spending within their means (limiting themselves to the money they had available). Nearly that many reported balancing their checkbook regularly, and three fourths reported regularly paying bills on time (85% in 1996).

Health care. Graduates consistently reported that they had been conscientious about routine medical and dental checkups over time. Nearly 90% percent reported seeing a doctor and going to the dentist at least once a year (NB these high percentages may reflect the need for monitoring of health issues described earlier in this chapter.)

Like the general population, ongoing attention to exercise and diet has proven more problematic. About two-thirds of graduates reported exercising regularly, and just over half reported watching their diet and weight. While it is encouraging that the trend is toward greater participation in physical activity, the fact that 10% also report living with obesity and/or diabetes or pre-diabetes is a disturbing statistic.

Psychosocial development. Seventy-five percent of graduates reported that they attempt to resolve problems using good social skills. Within their work lives, approximately 90% reported getting along with their clients, co-workers and supervisor and managing to keep personal problems to themselves at work. Responses from the employer study suggest that Threshold graduates are equal to other employees in terms of their ability to get along with co-workers and supervisors.

Leisure time. As stated earlier, for many alumni, childhood was fraught with isolation and/or social missteps, and in many instances admission to Threshold had marked the first opportunity for them to develop meaningful friendships. Thus, it was

gratifying that in each of the studies, when asked to name how they were most likely to spend their free time, being with friends consistently topped their lists.

When asked *with whom* they tended to socialize, graduates mentioned family members, followed by other Threshold alumni, a spouse/partner or children, co-workers, people met through acquaintances, and people met through an organization, religious or social group. Favored leisure activities included going to clubs, restaurants or movies; watching TV; engaging in physical exercise and/or hobbies; and using the computer/Internet.

Sixty to seventy percent of graduates were satisfied with their social life; however, when asked what would improve their current life situation, significant numbers expressed a longing for increased social opportunities, more chances to develop friendships, a life partner, and/or more opportunities for dating.

It was notable that satisfaction was highest among alumni who had remained in the Boston area. They reported more social activity than those who had moved back home; 76% (versus 68% of the total sample) reported initiating and planning social activity once a month, and 70% (versus 58% of the total sample) reported socializing at least once a week. Many had maintained a connection to Lesley, repeatedly returning to campus for social activities, to participate on panels during Family and Friends weekend, and to join in on alumni events.

> *On September 17, 2009, two alumni who had graduated in the 1990s took the day off from work to march along with hundreds of Lesley faculty and students as proud representatives of the Threshold community to the Centennial Academic Convocation at Sanders Theater commemorating the university's 100th anniversary.*

It is notable that a greater percentage of this Boston-based group has married or has a committed relationship with a long-term partner.

Those living with parents have been less socially engaged. Although 60% - a number comparable to the larger sample - reported initiating and planning social activities at least once a month, only 40% reported socializing weekly. Fewer than half reported being satisfied with their social life, compared to 60% of the entire sample.

Alumni living away from Boston, who lack the same access to other Threshold graduates, have had to extend their reach to form friendships. They socialize more than their Boston peers with co-workers, neighbors, and people met through organizations, religious or social groups.

Employment

Threshold's vocational training has enabled graduates to exceed the expectations of the program and of families. Indeed, the employment record of Threshold graduates has been consistently impressive. Over the years, 80% or more alumni have been employed at any given time, which compares favorably with their age-mates who have no disabilities and stands in contrast to the employment rate of 35-45 year olds who do have disabilities, which according to some sources may be as low as 35% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008).

The follow-up studies suggest that where a graduate resides has an impact on his or her employment. Those living in the Boston area were significantly more likely to be working (91% in 1996, 94% in 2008) than those living in other areas (73% in 1996, 77% in 2008). Those living with parents were less likely to be working (60% versus 77% of the entire cohort in 2008).

The various studies suggest that participation in the third-year program has a positive impact on employment. Eighty-four to eighty-seven percent of those who completed the Transition Year were employed at the time of the various studies, versus 74-76% of those who had not continued beyond graduation.

Over two thirds of respondents who were working were employed full-time. Another 24% were working at least 30 hours/week, which is significant when taking into consideration the large percentage of Threshold graduates who are employed in early childhood positions, where the work day is frequently shorter than 8 hours. Approximately 15% reported being employed in more than one job.

Job stability. The data suggest that Threshold graduates make stable employees. In the 2008 study, over half of the sample reported never having been unemployed at all in the past 10 years, and nearly 75% reported having held a job more than 5 years at some point in their working life.

The various studies investigated job changes. Forty-nine percent of the early group admitted to having lost a job at some point in their career; about half of this group reported that the job was cut, but others cited a bad job match, where they were unable to do the necessary tasks.

In 2008, 61% of the early cohort reported having left a job voluntarily. Approximately 30% had resigned to take a better position, but other reasons cited included an excessively long commute, insufficient salary, unkind behavior of other workers, and interpersonal tension with their supervisor. Twelve years earlier, members of this group had seemed to be struggling to find their niche; in addition to the above reasons for leaving a job, they had cited the position's having been too difficult, having lacked adequate supervision, or having not liked the line of work.

In 2008, 42% of those graduates who were not working cited health reasons. About 20% reported they were caring for children or explained they could not work because of restrictions related to their receipt of Social Security Disability Insurance.

Where they work. Threshold graduates have served in early childhood positions ranging from aides to lead teachers, with one remarkable graduate working her way up through the ranks to become the director of her daycare center. Alumni majoring in Business Services have worked in a wide variety of roles - in hotels as receptionist, bellman, or front-desk associate; in offices as file clerk, assistant office manager, or office manager; in retail as stock person or sales associate; and in supermarkets as bagger, cashier, or front-end manager. In health settings they have worked in escort or transport jobs and as food service or gift shop personnel; in group homes they have been activity assistants or program managers.

A few graduates have achieved a level of competence and confidence in their field that has enabled them to act in a supervisory capacity and become powerful role models to second-year students doing their field placement.

At least two alumni working as teachers in preschools or daycare centers have supervised Threshold interns, teaching them to prepare curriculum projects and providing a high level of guidance, direction, and reinforcement from the unique perspective of individuals who themselves had attended the program.

A young alumnus was so successful working on his job in a business setting that his supervisor asked him to find another Threshold graduate with similar skills to fill an open position. In this case, the graduate served as both a recruiter and a supervisor.

Salary and benefits. Although most graduates are not employed in jobs where they are getting ahead financially, 41% of the early cohort reported supporting themselves solely on their income. Alumni typically earn more than minimum wage (mean wage was $11.89), and the hourly earnings have risen steadily over the years, ranging from $5/hour up to $20/hour.

Across all the studies, 50-60% reported working in positions that have provided benefits, including health insurance, paid vacation and sick days and, in smaller numbers, dental insurance, tuition reimbursement and pension plans.

Job performance. Graduates tend to feel good about their job performance. In both 1996 and 2008, 80-95%of the early cohort stated they were in positions where they were able to perform well, and more than 85% of all respondents reported they were dependable, had the ability to get along with clients and co-workers, had the ability to perform the tasks required, completed tasks quickly enough, followed directions, remembered what to do, and got along with their co-workers and with their supervisor. Seventy-eight percent felt they consistently initiated performing job tasks without being told.

In the 1996 study that investigated employment of graduates from the perspective of employers (Osten & Noveck, 1996), work supervisors confirmed that Threshold alumni bring many strengths to the job. When asked to compare them with other employees in terms of job performance, employers rated Threshold alumni as equal to or higher than their non-disabled co-workers in attendance, punctuality, appropriate dress and hygiene, dedication to the job, attitude toward co-workers, and co-workers' attitude toward them. Threshold-trained workers scored *nearly* at the level of their peers in their ability to communicate their needs, accept supervision, and keep personal problems from interfering with work. However, relative to their co-workers without disabilities, Threshold alumni were observed to experience more difficulties learning and completing new tasks in a timely manner and demonstrating executive functioning skills (e.g., prioritizing tasks, generalizing learning, problem-solving and decision-making).

When asked about accommodations made for Threshold graduates, employers listed modifications of the job description, time adjustments, and altering staffing patterns to meet the needs of both the employee and the worksite. Seventy-seven percent of employers indicated they would hire their graduate again, a heartening response indeed since, despite the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, employers throughout the US have too often continued to be reluctant to hire individuals with disabilities.

Disclosure. As noted above, in their Understanding Learning Challenges course Threshold students learn that in order to benefit from the civil right protections afforded under the provisions of the ADA, an "otherwise qualified" employee must disclose his or her disability and ask for what he or she needs in order to perform "the essential functions of the job"(ADA, 1990). Despite the fact that many of the early group attended the program prior to the passage of this landmark law, a full 83% reported that they had disclosed their learning disability at work. Fifty-one percent had done so on their application or during the interview process. In about 10% of the cases, the employer knew the graduate had attended Threshold and, thus, disclosure was unnecessary. An additional 10% disclosed upon accepting the position or before beginning to work. Fifty-four percent of graduates had advocated for their own needs at work, identifying and requesting accommodations that would enable them to optimally perform their job. Of those who did not disclose, 58% felt they could do the work without identifying their learning disability, 16% feared disclosure would cost them their job, and others either felt unsure of how to disclose or didn't want to be thought of as less than capable.

There appears to be a strong correlation between disclosure and job success for Threshold alumni. The employer research (Osten & Noveck, 1996) indicates that graduates who self-disclosed during hiring or soon thereafter were rated by employers as equal to or better than their non-disclosing peers on a list of job skills, with the exception of dress and hygiene and ability to follow through on assignments. Despite research that warns of the dangers of self-disclosure of one's LD during the hiring process (Gerber, 2006), 79% of Threshold alumni who disclosed near the time of hire received raises and/or promotions, compared to 25% of those whose disabilities were discovered over time.

Being proactive about their needs and disclosing their LD up-front led to more accommodations. Thirty-nine percent of those who disclosed received some change in their job description to accommodate their learning disability, compared with only 26% of their non-disclosing peers. Twenty-eight percent received the increased supervision they needed (compared with 11% who did not disclose). Of those who disclosed, 19% were given increased responsibility, compared to 6% of those not disclosing.

Continuing Education

Many Threshold alumni have continued their education following graduation. More than half of the early cohort reported having taken at least one college level class - although not necessarily for credit - in the years after completing their Threshold experience. Beyond the aforementioned further education sought by some graduates to become teacher qualified, others have chosen to pursue either Child Development Associate (CDA) training or an associate's degree to supplement the credits earned at Threshold and meet the teacher qualifications of the National Association Of Education Of Young Children as well as the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Although it was not an anticipated path for alumni when the program was conceptualized and remains an unusual achievement, several graduates have received bachelor's degrees.

One woman returned to Lesley more than 15 years after graduating from Threshold to pursue her bachelor's degree, which she completed

in January 2010. One graduated in 2008 with a BA from Cambridge College. A handful of others have graduated from other degree programs.

Supports Graduates Use

The achievements of Threshold graduates have not been accomplished in a vacuum; many sources of support have helped alumni along their way. Like their age-mates in the general population who often live with parents and/or receive some financial help as they begin their adult lives (New York Times, 1988, 2009), the largest source of ongoing support for Threshold graduates is family. Relatives have at various times and to varying degrees, provided shelter, subsidized coverage of medical needs, helped bridge periods between jobs, provided legal advice, assisted with taxes, helped move from one residence to another, or contributed toward a car or home. But the most continuous focus of assistance from Threshold families has come in the form of emotional support. Three quarters of the families of the cohorts studied reported providing encouragement, often during critical moments of decision-making. Smaller numbers continue to help by arranging for support services, assisting in their graduate's search for a job or apartment, or helping with home maintenance or repair.

The latest study of the early cohort suggests that as graduates mature, they tend to widen their support networks beyond their parents. Many reported independently managing needs that had formerly been met by others. Parents often report that their greatest worry is the long-term wellbeing of their adult children after they are no longer alive to provide assistance and support; thus, it is heartening that 95% of the parents in the studies expressed confidence that their graduate had someone other than themselves to whom they could go for advice or help, including siblings, their spouse, friends, therapists, rehabilitation professionals, and even Threshold faculty.

Conclusion

Research suggests Threshold alumni are thriving as productive citizens and enjoying a satisfying quality of life. Ninety-one percent of graduates who have participated in the several follow-up studies have expressed satisfaction with their lives (nearly half being "very satisfied") and, equally telling, 87% of their parents have reported being either somewhat or very satisfied with their graduate's overall level of independence.

Nonetheless, despite evidence that Threshold students graduate with a strong set of skills, they – like all adults - face many challenges as they live their lives. Many seek continuing support from the program even years after graduation when they face employment challenges, experience changes in their living situations, find themselves in precarious financial situations, or need additional emotional support. In the past, faculty were able to individually provide this assistance or refer graduates to appropriate resources; however, this service has become too unwieldy as the numbers of graduates has grown. Thus, since the early 1990s faculty and administration have proposed development of a Threshold Life Resource Center to address the on-going needs of alumni and their parents.

Threshold students often arrive with physical disabilities along with their learning issues. Since the program has long been housed in buildings inaccessible for individuals with mobility issues, the university is seeking funds to fulfill Threshold's dream of building office and dormitory space that every student and faculty is able to access.

In addition, because it is costly to provide the level of intensive services required of the population of young adults with multiple disabilities served by Threshold, raising funds for increased scholarship support is a continuing priority. The goal is to ensure that Threshold programming is within the financial reach of all qualified students while still maintaining its high level of service, including its 1:3 staff-student ratio. Although the Threshold Scholarship fund, federal grants and loans, and support from such agencies as the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation have been available to ease the burden, the need for financial aid has never been greater.

Twenty- nine years after accepting its first cohort, Threshold continues to make every effort to respond to the changing needs of the students and community. For example, with the current shift in US demographics and the subsequent anticipated increase in need for services for senior citizens, reintroduction of the Human Services major as a vocational training option is being considered. In addition, the Early Childhood major may soon be expanded in order to comply with increasing government-mandated requirements in that field. Further, technology is being integrated to a greater extent in all aspects of the Threshold experience, with assistive technology increasingly being implemented to enhance print access and to facilitate students' ability to communicate.

As Lesley observes its centennial year, Threshold is strong and flourishing. From the mailing of the first admissions flyer in 1981, Threshold's applicant pool has been robust, and the admissions process has been competitive. Applicants have hailed from 25 states throughout the US and from countries around the globe, from Colombia to Saudi Arabia to Mexico to England. More than 565 graduates are demonstrating the skills to manage the responsibilities of adulthood, are leading far more independent lives than they were when they first entered the program, and are offering proof that transition programming can and does help individuals with disabilities meet their potential.

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