

## **Keep the End in Mind**

*By Lori Konopasek, Dean of Students*

Originally published by Exceptional Parent Magazine, September 2014

Think back to when you were a student. Were you thinking about the future and where you wanted to be when you graduated? Sometimes it's hard to keep end goals in mind, but it is so important, especially with our limited time to educate and train our students.

When asked about goals after graduation, students at [Shepherds College](#) typically say things like; being connected to a community of people, maintaining an apartment, having a job, and managing bills. Each goal amounts to a level of independence that students strive to attain, ideals they may never have thought possible before. Generally students do not understand what it takes to accomplish each of these goals, or what success really looks like, but that is where educators can step in and teach.

Shepherds College is a three-year, post-secondary school for students with intellectual disabilities. That's just three years to help students grow in independence regarding their daily living skills, vocational capabilities, social skills, self-advocacy, self-awareness, and problem solving skills. There is no time to waste. Though the time passes quickly, the concept of keeping the end in mind is critical in order to maximize opportunities. As educators, there are many ways we can instill this philosophy in our students through basic interactions as we prepare them for the next step.

### **Talk about keeping the end in mind.**

Simply by talking about their end goals, the amount of time they have, their personal progress, and the next step, students will begin to think more futuristically; it will then guide their choices and programming. Challenge the educators, student, and family to make sure current choices and programming are in line with the end goal. If not, it is time to re-evaluate.

### **Define and clarify.**

Help students map out what success in daily living skills, employment, social relationships, and independent living really takes. At one point, a first year male student shared with me what he thought college was all about. It was basically a scene from a movie that included parties, skipping class, eating whatever he wanted, and sleeping a lot. Together we defined what success at college looked like and compared it to the images he pictured. He had the choice of changing the picture in his mind or continuing to struggle with expectations. I am pleased to share he did change his expectations and successfully graduated!

**Remind students of the direct impact of their choices on their future.**

This reminder is crucial for students to start thinking long term, and it starts now. If a student is being disrespectful, talk through how that would impact their job or work relationship. Then turn it around to them again and see if they know what to do differently to have a positive result at the future employment. When they take initiative to complete a task, compliment them on how that positive choice would help their employment in the future.

**Talk through adult choices.**

Many students are motivated to become more independent; however, they may not know what it looks like. Use this motivation to educate them on how adults think and act. Compare adult choices with student or teen choices. Adult choices include integrity, responsibility, initiative, diligence, respect, and discernment. Each of these choices is needed for employment. Student or teen choices may include laziness, procrastination, gossip, dishonesty, rudeness, and blaming. None of these are employable skills and will not set the student up for success. Adult choices pave the way for employment and independent living. This language helps students to focus on their end goal, and being a productive adult living as independently as possible.

**Think broad scope in preparing a student.**

Do not miss the opportunity to impact their daily living or employment skills related to their living environment. Even though students do not live at school, they can prepare in areas beyond academics while at school. Create jobs for students to help maintain the classroom and remind them of implications related to maintaining a home. Fulfilling expectations at school builds in patterns of reliability and responsibility at home. Managing free time is an important skill as an adult. Allow students to have free time and offer support as needed in order to equip them to handle free time at home. Support students in making transition plans during breaks so that they reduce the amount of slippage in between semesters.

**Teach the bottom line.**

There is no need for students to try and “catch” what you are teaching. There is always a deeper lesson associated with what we teach. Be clear and concise about the expectation or lesson. If a student is not doing his or her job and hindering the success of peers, the bottom line is respecting others and helping them succeed by accomplishing their responsibility (teamwork). Frequently students save work until the last minute and become very stressed when things do not go as planned. The bottom line is to prepare ahead of time because you don't know what will come up. If a student makes a mistake, take the opportunity to talk through what happened and future planning. The bottom line is that we will all make mistakes and are responsible to learn from them and adjust.

**Keep it concrete and celebrate.**

Map out student goals, draw pictures, chart growth, give examples, line up successful and unsuccessful choices, and keep frequent lists of success. Being an adult and growing in independence is hard work. People do not tell you that before you try. Reinforce and praise the growth you see in each student!

As educators, we model independence to students. We can use our time to challenge student thinking and help them move towards personal and professional growth as they work to keep the end in mind.