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# Massachusetts Hospital School Program Evaluation Enhancing Transition to the Community

Russell Schutt, PhD – UMass Boston Sociology Department Chair

## Summary/Abstract

Throughout the years, MHS has responded to the changing medical needs of children and young adults in MA and continues to be a model program nationally. Currently, MHS educates approximately 87 students from 58 MA communities. Since 2003, about 10-17 students have graduated each year.

At age 22, young adults with disabilities transition from students to emergent adults living in the community. Students graduating from the Massachusetts Hospital School (MHS) are faced with opportunities and choices with respect to how and where they will live, work, study, socialize and receive ongoing medical care.

In order to understand how well current transitional services prepare graduates for community living and inclusion, MHS administrators contracted with the University of Massachusetts Boston's Graduate Program in Applied Sociology to interview alumni about their experiences, thoughts, and perspectives.

## Approach and Student Involvement

In order to better understand MHS's role in the transitional period from MHS to community living, UMass Boston graduate students conducted face-to-face interviews with 17 MHS alumni, ranging in age from 23 to 31 years old.

These alumni reported having attended MHS from two to thirteen years, and all graduated at the age of 21 or 22. The group interviewed was comprised of five females (29%) and twelve males (71%), as compared to the 59 females (40%) and 88 males (60%) who graduated from MHS from 2003-2013 (N=147). While the interviewers did not ask directly about disabilities, cerebral palsy and muscular dystrophy were the most commonly cited.

## Results/Impacts

**MHS faces many challenges in striking a balance that meets the needs of a wide range of students. Interviews suggest that successful community living is somewhat conditional on the cognitive functioning of each alumna.**

**The following are critical to a successful transition:**

- Strong support and engagement from family members or another strong advocate in the community;
- Engagement in a structured program, such as college, a day program, volunteering, employment, etc., for both socialization and building a sense of self-worth; and
- Ability to live independently in an apartment and proximate to the MBTA.

**Analysis of the interviews leads to many recommendations for further consideration, including:**

- Assess and improve engagement with families;
- Offer greater access, orientation, and guidance on the use of social media tools and various software programs
- Offer (or reinstate) courses helpful in the transition to community living;
- Add more vocational opportunities related to future employment and/or volunteering;
- Expand academic opportunities, by offering more challenging courses, and better prepare students and manage their expectations about college;
- Provide more information and guidance to students and parents on navigating health care;
- Offer additional guidance regarding hiring and managing Personal Care Assistants (PCAs), and ongoing support;
- Prepare students for managing conflict with PCAs, roommates, family, staff, etc.; and
- Offer coordinated alumni support regarding utilization of community services, social engagement, and overall well-being.

**Overall impact: improved program for transition to community.**

## Goals and Objectives

- To better understand the criteria that contribute to successful transition
- Provide analysis and recommendations to MHS regarding program implementation

The interview protocol, as developed by graduate students in the Research Methods I course, focused on living conditions (housing), experiences at MHS (family visits, classes, peer community), post-MHS experiences (access to services, PCA relationship, education and job training and substance abuse), as well as social support networks and connections.

## Partnership Information

**Massachusetts Hospital School**  
J. T. Jones and Richard Crisafulli

**UMass Boston**  
**Institute for Community Inclusion** - William Kiernan  
**Applied Sociology Program** - Stephanie Hartwell,  
Russell Schutt, and Spring 2013 Research Methods I  
Students

**Public Policy PhD Candidate** - Amy Helburn

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