

# Developing Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs) for Students with Disabilities: *Guidelines and Talking Points*

## INTRODUCTION

Like any other student, students with disabilities can benefit from competency-based learning that takes place in their communities and in real world environments through the **Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO)** process. ELO coordinators, special educators, and other staff within the school need to work closely with each student and his or her family member to ensure that the ELO is designed to meet the unique needs of each student. This document provides guidelines and examples of how to work with community partners who may not be familiar with how to support students with diverse learning needs.

This work has been supported, in part, by the New Hampshire Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education, and the New Hampshire Community of Practice for Secondary Transition.

*This document is available in alternative formats upon request.*

## CONTACT

Sarah O'Rourke | Project Assistant  
sarah.orourke@unh.edu  
603.228.2084 | relay 711

[www.inclusiveed.org](http://www.inclusiveed.org)

### **Include the Student and Family in All Phases of the Process**

As with any ELO, the student should be an active decision-maker in all phases of the process. First, the school should bring the student and family member together to identify the student's learning life and career goals. The targeted goals should be clearly aligned with the student's expressed areas of interest. The student should be able to understand how the experience is relevant to what he or she wants to learn and to his or her future.

### **The Student and Family Help Identify Community Partners**

As part of the planning process, the student, family member and school staff should decide together which community partners to approach. Family members may have valuable community connections that can be helpful when developing a list of community partners.

### **The Student Presents Him or Herself to the Community Partner**

The student, family member, and school staff should decide ahead of time how to approach each community partner. First contacts may be made by the school, and then the student may plan a follow-up contact with the community partner as he or she is able. The student may require coaching and support throughout this process. Meetings with community partners should occur with the student present.

The student, family member, and school staff should decide ahead of time how to talk about the student's unique learning goals and needs. It is not appropriate and, without parent permission, it is illegal to reveal the student's diagnosis or disability to the community partner. Instead, the student, family member, and school staff should develop a simple list of the student's preferences and needs, including physical, social, and communication needs. A list of assistive technology and school supports should be included (such as software, communication devices, school coaching, among others).

Unless the student and family are clear that they want the community partner to know the student's disability/diagnosis, the student should present him or herself to community partner in terms of goals, strengths, aspirations, and needs. Here are some examples:

*"I want to learn about auto body repair and will need to show that I can do the work. I do some work at home so I am sure I will be a quick learner. I sometimes get overwhelmed when a lot of different people tell me to do things, so it's easier for me if you give me one task at a time, and watch me do it to make sure I'm doing it correctly."*

Student using a communication device: *"As you can see, I communicate through this computer board. I can read documents and I can write, I just need this board to translate my words into voice. I just need people to be patient with me as I type."*

## SUMMARY

### Put the Student in the Center of the Process

- Make sure the student and parent are included in all aspects of the ELO development and implementation process.
- Link supports to each student's unique academic and social/emotional needs.
- Intentionally build the relationship between the community partner and the student.
- Support and prepare the student to self-advocate.
- Emphasize the student's skills, strengths, abilities and needs.
- Establish high expectations based upon each student's goals.

For students with disabilities, ELOs can be an important strategy for creating deep learning for the student, for building important and valuable community connections and relationships and can help the student develop confidence and development of self-efficacy.

## WEB RESOURCES

Institute on Disability at UNH  
[www.iod.unh.edu](http://www.iod.unh.edu)

Keene State Transition Resources  
[www.transitions.keenecommons.net](http://www.transitions.keenecommons.net)

Keene State College ELO Resources  
[www.beyondclassroom.org](http://www.beyondclassroom.org)

Q.E.D. Foundation  
[www.qedfoundation.org](http://www.qedfoundation.org)

Student who wants to share his diagnosis: *"I am really interested in learning about how to do road surveys. I have Tourette's syndrome, and so I have ticks and make noises. We would just have to explain this to people I work with or I can be in a quiet area. My ticks may increase when I am under pressure or stress, but I don't mean anything by them."*

*"I am very interested in law and becoming a lawyer, and I have done some work in my uncle's law firm. I need to learn this set of competencies (hands the community partner his rubric). I also have a letter of reference from my uncle. Mrs. Richards here will provide support from the school because I have seizures about once a month and I know it can be scary."* (Mrs. Richards takes over and talks about the education and support the school will give the community partner).

### The Student is Prepared for the Interview

As you can see from these examples, each student must be very self-aware and comfortable talking about him- or herself. Not all students will be able to do this. For example, some students with autism may be unable to engage in an extemporaneous conversation. The student, family member, and school can prepare a script for the youth to use in the interview.

Some students may also refuse to talk about their needs. There is still stigma associated with certain emotional or mental health disorders and the student and family may be afraid of what people will think of them. It's important to respect this view. In those cases, the school staff member who works with the student should counsel him or her with prompts such as *"it makes you look really good if you talk about yourself in the interview instead of me talking about you. They will want to know what you are good at and where you need help. Let's make a list: What works and what doesn't work for you? What are you good at? What do you need help with? What are the characteristics of the people do you want to work with?"* The school staff member can then use this list to help the student develop talking points and a script for practice.

### Working with the Special Education Process

The ELO coordinator or certified school personnel may not understand all of the compliance requirements or best practices in special education. Every student who has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 (Rehabilitation Plan) has a coordinator or case manager in the school who is responsible for his or her plan. This person should be part of the ELO planning team and can contribute important information about how the student best learns, about supports that can be provided such as assistive technology, physical and learning accommodations, and behavior supports, among others. The team should also consider alternative means for assessing competence that allow for each student's unique communication and learning preferences and needs.

