



practice brief

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Meeting the New Requirements of WIOA through Partnerships with Institutions of Higher Education Enrolling Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

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Significant changes were made to the state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency services program with passage of the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). These changes, which include specific resources to help individuals with disabilities find, obtain, and maintain meaningful competitive integrated employment, may lead to more optimal employment outcomes for youth and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), who are often faced with under- or unemployment in adulthood (Siperstein, Parker & Drascher, 2013). WIOA also increased the emphasis on the area of postsecondary education, possibly due to some of the recent advancements around inclusive higher education in the US (Grigal, Papay, Smith, Hart, & Verbeck (2019). Thus, more partnerships between state VR agencies and institutions of higher education (IHEs) are being cultivated and evolving (Grigal & Smith, 2016).

This brief provides an overview of the key provisions of WIOA and offers suggested strategies for the establishment or enhancement of partnerships between state VR agencies and IHEs. For this purpose, we have grouped the key provisions into five overarching goals: preparing workers for the 21st century labor market, pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS), post-secondary training, career over job focus, and the dual-customer approach. For each goal we provide a summary of the key issues and requirements, along with recommended strategies that IHEs can use in partnership with VR agencies.

21st Century Labor Market

Goal: Prepare workers for the 21st century workforce, while helping businesses find the skilled employees they need.

Summary: As the Baby Boom generation retires from the labor force, post-secondary training is critical to ensure there are sufficient qualified candidates to meet workforce needs. Today's fastest-growing industries demand newer and higher-level skills. Individuals with at least some postsecondary education have captured 11.5 million of the 11.6 million jobs created since 2007, whereas individuals with a high school diploma or less education have faced a net loss of more than 5.5 million jobs since 2007 (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016). This means that in the 21st century workplace, businesses not only need better-trained employees, but also need more of them. This demand for skilled labor provides a significant opportunity for VR/IHE partnerships to be created or strengthened around education of students with IDD to meet those business needs.

Strategies for Partnership: Working collaboratively to educate individuals with IDD to improve employment outcomes is a shared goal of IHEs and VR. Strategies for IHEs can include:

- documenting the connections between IHE courses of study, credentials, and known business needs;
- including input from VR in course content development and implementation; and
- establishing a focus group or ad hoc committee, in partnership with VR, to identify local 21st century labor market demands and how they can be met through the IHE.

Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)

Goal: Support a meaningful transition from school to postsecondary training or the workplace by providing Pre-ETS to students with disabilities.

Summary: Under WIOA, VR agencies are required to allocate 15% or more of the state’s total federal VR allotment to Pre-ETS. Pre-ETS are a set of approved services for students with disabilities who are eligible or potentially eligible for VR services. There are five required Pre-ETS: job exploration counseling, workplace readiness training, work-based learning experiences, counseling on postsecondary enrollment, and instruction in self-advocacy. Pre-ETS can be provided by the VR agency directly and/or through contracts with community-based providers of these services.

Strategies for Partnership: In addition to contracting for Pre-ETS through community rehabilitation programs, VR can also partner with comprehensive transition programs (CTPs) and IHEs to provide these services. IHEs can prepare for this role by:

- learning more about the requirements and parameters of Pre-ETS;
- establishing service provision models to meet required Pre-ETS objectives through existing IHE programs; and
- using existing relationships to pursue a contract with VR to provide Pre-ETS.

Post-Secondary Training

Goal: Provide career-oriented counseling and services for individuals with disability (including IDD) that includes postsecondary training.

Summary: Two important tenets of the VR program are informed choice and individualized services focused on competitive integrated employment. VR professionals will consider several aspects of an individual’s characteristics and experiences while planning for their career goals. Taking this individualized approach, each person can be supported in a plan for vocational training and competitive integrated employment that fits their characteristics and interests.

Strategies for Partnership: IHE programs are a strong source of information for individuals with IDD on postsecondary education options. Providing information to VR about the service capacities of the IHE and its potential to meet students’ needs can strengthen VR’s capacity to individualize services. IHEs can share this information with VR agencies by:

- providing periodic presentations about IHE programs and career-related services and outcomes to VR leadership and staff; and
- asking to co-present with VR about inclusive higher education options at high school events.

Focus on Careers Rather than Jobs

Goal: Strengthen long-term career outcomes for individuals to promote economic growth across populations.

Summary: WIOA includes new Common Performance Measures for VR agencies that replace outdated standards and indicators with new standards that are more focused on long-term career outcomes. These Common Performance Measures highlight new expectations for VR agencies, emphasizing postsecondary credentials and job-retention timelines.

Strategies for Partnership: This emphasis on careers presents an opportunity for IHEs to partner with VR to be a valued resource for students with IDD to begin their pathway to careers. IHEs can enhance their ability to support such partnerships by:

- aligning student data collected with VR’s Common Performance Measures;
- tracking alumni employment outcomes over time; and
- sharing data on employment outcomes with VR.

Dual-Customer Approach

Goal: Provide support services to businesses in hiring, retaining, and training individuals with disabilities to better meet business needs.

Summary: Historically, state VR agencies have worked to meet the needs of the eligible client with a disability. Counselors and VR agencies focused on assessing, serving, and placing the individual into employment. Since WIOA, there is a greater expectation for VR agencies to engage with the business community, as well as with clients with disability. This is often referred to as the “dual-customer approach.”

Strategies for Partnership: Working together, VR and IHEs can provide complementary services helping businesses meet their human resource needs. Some strategies for IHEs to pursue partnership with VR include:

- holding joint “executive roundtables” with businesses to hear about their talent needs;
- using joint VR/IHE expertise regarding disability and employment to train and give technical assistance to businesses to meet their talent needs;
- engaging with Chambers of Commerce, Workforce Development Boards, and governor’s committees on employment of people with disabilities; and
- developing a joint VR/IHE strategic plan for working more effectively with businesses.

Conclusion

The requirements and priorities created in WIOA present novel opportunities for IHEs to partner with VR to better meet the needs of students with IDD and businesses. Using the strategies identified here, IHEs can nurture and expand partnerships with VR, and ultimately help more individuals with IDD achieve and retain meaningful competitive integrated employment.

References

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