



practice brief

vr&youth

Rehabilitation Research & Training Center



VR's Role in the Seamless Transition from Higher Education to Employment

Daria Domin and Jennifer Sulewski

One of the strongest predictors of post-school employment for students with intellectual disability and/or autism (ID/A) is obtaining work experiences while in high school (Mazzotti, Rowe, Sinclair, Poppen, Woods, & Shearer, 2016; Test, Mazzotti, Mustian, Fowler, Kortering, & Kohler, 2009). There is growing evidence of a similar effect among college students. In a study of students who attended Transition and Postsecondary Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) programs, Grigal, Papay, Smith, Hart, and Verbeck (2019) found that students who obtained a paid job while enrolled in the TPSID program were almost 15 times more likely to have a paid job at school exit than those who did not work for pay while enrolled.

Based on this evidence, processes for providing job placement and ongoing supports should start in high school or college and continue seamlessly into adulthood. The concept of a seamless transition from school to work, as applied in the high school setting, involves “a sequential delivery of specific transition services designed to result in uninterrupted, or seamless, transition from public education to employment and/or postsecondary education” (Luecking & Luecking, 2015). For students with ID/A already participating in postsecondary education, a similar model can be applied to the transition from higher education to the workforce. This transition is facilitated by a strong partnership between state vocational rehabilitation (VR) services and a student’s postsecondary education institution and can help ensure students’ continued employment success post-graduation. Supporting seamless transition after college requires a shared understanding that a primary goal for students is to be employed after graduating.

A team of researchers from the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) conducted four case studies of partnerships between VR agencies and higher education entities across the country to identify effective VR partnership strategies. Each of the four programs was identified as having an exemplary VR partnership supporting students with ID/A. The case studies involved site visits at each of the programs where we conducted interviews with higher education program staff, VR staff, students, and parents.

One theme that emerged from these interviews was the shared role of VR agencies and institutions of higher education (IHEs) in supporting students’ employment, both while in school and after exiting higher education. This brief focuses on those findings.

Expectation and Timelines

Each of the higher education programs studied had the expectation that their students would obtain employment. However, the programs expectations differed regarding when employment would take place. One three-year program placed students in community jobs in their last year in the program. Other program models were more flexible about the timing, but placed an emphasis on employment and/or internships while in college. Two programs offered the option of a one-year track, with the expectation that students would be employed in the community at the end of the year.

Career Development in College

At each case study site, employment supports were provided by both the postsecondary education program and VR staff. Staff at the IHE worked with students on assessments, pre-employment activities, career development activities, as well as finding students employment both during the program and beyond, as described by one IHE employment staff member:

I typically see students about their second year, sometimes in their first year of the program, doing anything from internships, volunteer, employment readiness, applications, outreach to employers ... So, it's basically from when they're thinking they want to start working or volunteering all the way through their permanent placement and retention.

Marking the Transition

Frequently, an official meeting or event was held to plan for the student's transition to employment after program exit. Communication between all parties was essential to making all the pieces fall into place for a successful transition. Each case study site had individual transition meetings that involved VR staff, IHE staff, students, parents, and other sources of support such as community rehabilitation providers (CRPs). These meetings generally occurred up to a year prior to graduation. As one IHE staff member put it:

Well, with VR and [the other IHE staff], we always have a transition meeting ... where the families come, the social advisor, the career academics, and we're all in one room. We figure out what they want to do when they graduate. This is done not a day before they graduate, but maybe they're in their final semester. And then that's when VR's part of it, because after they leave then they're with VR. So we kind of have everybody in the room on the same page: "What do you want to do going forward? Are you going to live at home with your parents? If you don't, how are you going to pay for an apartment?" Stuff like that. So it's very career focused in these transition meetings, where VR will set them up with some type of provider that will actively go out there and search [for a job] for them.

Student Relationship with VR After Exit

According to the Maryland Seamless Transition Collaborative model, an active VR agency case and a link to a CRP at the time of school exit are keys to a seamless transition (Luecking & Luecking, 2015). Reflecting this model, once students at case study sites graduated from their postsecondary education programs, job supports were typically transferred to a new VR contract. This new contract was usually with a CRP contracted by VR. In some cases, the CRP was affiliated with the IHE, but separate from the academic program; in other cases, it was with a completely different entity. After placement in a community job, supports could continue for a limited time (typically 90 days), after which the former student would have to reopen a VR case to continue receiving job supports.

Conclusion

For most college students, with or without disabilities, the goal upon exiting college is to move on to a successful adult life and the beginning of a career. For students with ID/A, transition from college to career requires thoughtful supports coordinated across the higher education program and the adult service system. These case studies illustrate how IHEs and VR agencies can partner to provide those coordinated supports. Some common elements for success include placing a clear expectation and/or timeline of employment as part of the college experience; partnering to support career development while the student is in college; having clear communication mechanisms around the time of transition; and providing ongoing adult supports, as needed, beyond college. When these factors are in place, the partners can work together to support a seamless transition, enabling students to maximize the benefits of postsecondary education and move on to fulfilling careers.

References

- Grigal, M., Papay, C., & Domin, D. (2018, February). *Strategies to support paid employment of students with intellectual disability in higher education*. Poster session presented at the meeting of the Council for Exceptional Children, Tampa, FL.
- Grigal, M., Papay, C., Smith, F., Hart, D., & Verbeck, R. (2018). Experiences that predict employment for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in federally funded higher education programs. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 42, 17-28.
- Luecking, R., & Fabian, E. (2017). Vocational rehabilitation outcomes for students participating in a model transition program. VR and Youth Rehabilitation Research and Training Center Research Brief, Issue No. 01. Rockville, MD: TransCen, Inc.
- Luecking, D., & Luecking, R. (2015). Translating research into a seamless transition model. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 38, 4–13.
- Mazzotti, V. L., Rowe, D. A., Sinclair, J., Poppen, M., Woods, W. E., & Shearer, M. L. (2016). Predictors of post-school success: A systematic review of NLTS2 secondary analyses. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 39, 196–215.
- Test, D. W., Mazzotti, V. L., Mustian, A. L., Fowler, C. H., Korterling, L. J., & Kohler, P. H. (2009). Evidence-based secondary transition predictors for improving post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 32, 160–181.

About the Authors

Daria Domin is a research associate at the Institute on Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston where she manages projects such as StateData.info and Catada.info and performs quantitative data analysis for Think College.

Jennifer Sulewski is a senior research associate at the Institute on Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston. She conducts research and evaluation on employment, higher education, and other forms of community life engagement for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Funding & Citation

By the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living, Grant Number: 90RT5034.

Domin, D., & Sulewski, J. (2019). VR's Role in the Seamless Transition from Higher Education to Employment. VR and Youth Rehabilitation Research and Training Center Practice Brief, Issue No. 04. Rockville, MD: TransCen, Inc.