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The Importance of Formal and Informal Communication Strategies in Maintaining Effective Partnerships Between Vocational Rehabilitation and Inclusive Higher Education Programs

Jennifer Sulewski, Nerlie Blackburn, and Meg Grigal

Over the past decade, the field of inclusive higher education has expanded considerably, offering a growing number of options for students with intellectual disabilities and/or autism (ID/A) to access college experiences that include career development and employment (Grigal & Smith, 2016; Grigal, Hart, Smith, Domin, Weir, & Sulewski, 2016). This focus on employment spurs many of these programs to partner with state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies (Grigal & Smith, 2016; Plotner & Marshall 2015). However, these partnerships require staff from both entities to develop an understanding about each partner's role to work together effectively. A recent survey of higher education program personnel reflected that only 31% of respondents had a high level of understanding of VR and the duties they perform (Plotner & Marshall, 2016).

Communication is Essential to Partnership

Communication is number one. That's the first thing that needs to happen. And the last thing that needs to happen, and all of the things in the middle.

–IHE staff member

To identify common elements of effective partnerships, we conducted a series of site visits to institutions of higher education (IHE) programs that had long established collaborations with VR and conducted interviews with VR and IHE staff. At each site we visited, professionals shared stories about effective communication being a key contributor to the success of their partnership. Interviewees recommended that anyone setting up a VR/higher education partnership "just communicate a lot, talk a lot," and establish "a protocol or an understanding from the beginning about what everybody's job is and how you want to communicate and who's going to handle what....Be really clear from the beginning." It was clear that targeted and intentional communication was essential to establishing the goals of the partnership. This brief highlights insights from the VR counselors, VR administrators, and higher education staff who were interviewed about the importance of both formal and informal communication mechanisms between state VR agencies and institutions of higher education serving students with ID/A.

Formal Communication Mechanisms are the Starting Point

Rather than emailing and making case notes back and forth, we find that [meeting monthly] face-to-face helps.

–Higher education staff

Each of the partnerships we visited had a deliberately constructed set of formal communication mechanisms. Often, this entailed the creation of regularly scheduled meetings, which took place anywhere from monthly, to quarterly, to twice a year. For example, one program held quarterly meetings at the management level and monthly meetings with front line staff to review individual student cases. A VR counselor described these regular meetings as a helpful way to "check in about each student [and] update us on what's happening on their side … and [update them on] what's happening from our perspective so that we're all on the same page, all the time."

In addition to meetings, these partnerships sought other mechanisms to be present in each other's realm of operation. In some cases, partners served on each other's advisory boards allowing staff to see and hear the "big picture" of what was going on in the program outside of their specific roles or duties. Another strategy for maintaining connections and supporting each other was to include VR staff in IHE events. In one program VR staff attended student orientation; in others, staff would participate in IHE career days or attend graduation. Often, IHE staff would conduct presentations with VR administration regarding the purpose of inclusive higher education and its impact on employment outcomes for students with ID. In addition to raising awareness, these communication mechanisms highlighted both entities' commitment to the partnership.

Informal Communication is Equally Important, if not More Important

I think the biggest tool that we have that [VR] appreciates is that we communicate and we have a relationship with them.

—College program administrator

The formal communication strategies described above were limited to quarterly or monthly interactions and the occasional special event. While practitioners valued these strategies, they also indicated that this level of communication was not sufficient for their partnerships to work. Front line staff at both IHEs and VR agencies also engaged consistently in various forms of informal communication such as emailing, texting, and/ or calling their counterparts anywhere from a few times a week to multiple times a day. These communications usually involved quick consultation or updates on particular issues involving students, often yielding valuable information that might have been missed in a more formal setting. Staff from each of the partnerships engaged in such communication, and it was one of the most frequently cited factors when staff were asked to describe what made the partnership work well. Program staff identified the formation of personal relationships as a key outcome of this ongoing formal and informal communication. These relationships, combined with a strong sense of shared purpose, led to VR and college staff coming together as a cross agency team on behalf of students.

VR and College Staff can Work as a Team to Support Students

We feel like a team and there's … real affection between [the VR counselors] and [our staff].

—College program staff

These cross-organization teams were particularly cohesive when they came together to address a student who was struggling or needed additional support. When these struggles occurred, staff from both partners would come together in a team meeting to discuss the issue. One college program staff member gave an example of how valuable VR involvement could be in such meetings:

"These two students were very, very capable but their relationship was getting in the way of their success academically, and they were ready to just drop out. So, we were able to support them and list what the options would be. And [the VR counselor] was in that meeting, and it wouldn't have gone the same way without her there because she was able to speak from the VR's perspective and we were able to speak from the college's perspective, and those are different."

Tips for Effective Communication between IHE and VR Staff Supporting Students with ID/A in Higher Education

- Learn about each other's goals and systems. A shared understanding of where each partner is coming from is an important starting point. For example, IHE staff should understand the importance of documenting employment outcomes for the VR agency, and VR staff should understand the primacy of the academic calendar for the IHE.

- Set up formal communication structures from the beginning. Decide who will meet regularly, how often, and what will be on the agenda. These standing meetings lay the groundwork for an effective partnership by establishing it as a priority and ensuring ongoing communication.

- Encourage informal communication. Identify staff members' preferred communication mechanism (e.g., telephone calls, text messages, emails). Nurture an expectation of frequent communication as issues arise, rather than waiting until a next standing meeting.

- Set the stage for working as a team by focusing on relationship building. Staff can get to know each other by holding meetings in person, allowing time for getting to know each other, and gathering informally outside the formal meeting context.

Conclusion

Establishing effective partnerships between IHEs and VR to support the employment goals of college students with ID/A requires both formal and informal communication. Creating both kinds of communication structures can result in a team-based approach to problem-solving and allows both entities to gain a stronger understanding of the goals and structure of their partner's organization.

References

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About the Authors

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 land developmental disabilities.

Nerlie Blackburn was a Research Study Coordinator at the Institute for Community Inclusion, primarily working on the Job Driven Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center.

Meg Grigal, Ph.D. is the principal investigator of the TPSID National Coordinating Center, co-director of Think College and a senior research fellow at the Institute for Community Inclusion at University of Massachusetts Boston.

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