

research brief

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Rehabilitation Research & Training Center



Transition Practices of Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors Serving Students and Youth with Disabilities

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The Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) emphasizes the delivery of transition-related services to youth with disabilities. This emphasis has required state VR agencies (SVRAs) to shift resources for the provision of services with the intent to improve successful employment outcomes for this population. Although much is known in the transition-related literature regarding best practices to improve post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities (e.g., Haber et al., 2016), inadequate attention has been paid to vocational rehabilitation counselor skills and practices needed to comply with the mandates of WIOA and improve youth outcomes in vocational rehabilitation. This study surveyed VR counselors in 13 high performing SVRAs to rate the importance of transition-related skills and practices, and their preparation to undertake these activities.

Overall, VR counselors rated the importance of all transition-related items as high, but rated their preparation to perform these practices significantly lower. Job exploration counseling, one of the five pre-employment transition services cited in WIOA, was identified as the most important transition skill. In terms of preparation to perform these skills and WIOA practices, involving employers in the transition process was rated the lowest. We also solicited feedback on barriers to effective VR services for transitioning youth, and this sample of VR counselors cited lack of time and case management resources as the major challenges to success. These findings have implications for caseload specialization and preparation of VR counselors (Luecking, Neubert & Fabian, in press).

Methods

Participants

With the cooperation of the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), we invited the directors of 13 state VR agencies (SVRAs) to participate in the study. The SVRAs were selected on the basis of their successful VR closure outcomes using RSA-911 based on a national study conducted by Honeycutt et al. (2015). From these states, 538 VR counselors out of a total of a possible 1,690 VR counselors (a 32% response rate) completed a survey designed to solicit responses regarding perceived skills and preparation needed to effectively provide VR services to transitioning students and youth. In terms of caseload proportion, almost 70% indicated that students and youth comprised at least 25% of their caseload, with 16% having an entire caseload devoted to the population.

The Instrument

We developed a 35 item web-based survey, the *VR Transition Practices Scales*, to solicit input from the selected SVRAs and their counselors regarding their perceptions of importance and preparedness to perform various transition-related practices. The development of the survey included a review of two scales used previously to assess the perceived importance of transition-related practices and the preparation of VR counselors (Kierpiec, 2012; Plotner, et al., 2012), applying criteria of relevance to transition-related activities in these scales, insuring that content and wording was consistent with contemporary research and mandates of the WIOA, and a final national expert review.

The *VR Transition Practices Scales* asked respondents to rate each transition-related practice based on their perception of its *importance* and their *preparation* to perform it by wording the item: “How important is this practice to you” and “How prepared are you to perform it.” Respondents rated each on a four point Likert scale from 1 (“Not at all”) to 4 (“Extremely”). They also were asked to identify the major barrier they encountered from a drop down list of 12 barriers (e.g., collaboration, local employment options) to effectively serving students and youth on their caseload.

Data Analysis

Means, percentages and standard deviations were computed for each item for each variable. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to explore the effect of caseload specialization on the dependent variables.

Results

What do VR counselors identify as the most important skills and practices and how prepared are they to perform them?

Means for each scale item are depicted in Table 1. As the data indicate, each of the transition-related practice items was rated at least “moderately important” (3.0 out of a 4.0 point scale). The item “job exploration counseling” or exploring the world of work and matching skills to job demands was rated the highest and “collaborating with LEAs on evaluating post-school outcomes” was rated the lowest, although still above 3.0.

In general, ratings for the Preparation subscale (perception of being prepared to perform the practice) were lower, with a range of mean scores from 3.52 for “developing the Individual Plan for Employment (IPE) prior to school exit” to 2.50 for “Involving employers in the transition process.” There was more variation in ratings for the Preparation scale compared to Importance scale. We also explored differences in Preparation by caseload proportion of students and youth with disabilities. There was significant variation between counselors with high proportion of student/youth caseload and those with lower proportion. That is, the more students and youth on the VR counselor caseload the better their perceived preparation to perform transition-related skills.

Table 1*Means and standard deviations for VR Transition Practices Scale*

Item	Importance		Preparation	
	<i>M</i>	(SD)	<i>M</i>	(SD)
*Job exploration counseling	3.80	(.46)	3.40	(.63)
Secure workplace learning experiences	3.70	(.57)	2.90	(.86)
*Partner with adult agencies	3.69	(.54)	3.38	(.71)
*Conduct career assessments	3.67	(.55)	3.29	(.67)
Secure workplace readiness training	3.67	(.58)	3.04	(.80)
*Collaborate & arrange Pre ETS with LEA	3.67	(.61)	3.19	(.80)
Engage youth in VR prior to school exit	3.66	(.57)	3.48	(.68)
Promote family engagement in transition	3.65	(.56)	3.35	(.69)
*Counsel on post-secondary education opportunities	3.60	(.58)	3.43	(.68)
Provide benefits counseling	3.55	(.68)	3.19	(.86)
*Secure paid employment	3.55	(.65)	2.92	(.86)
Develop IPE prior to school exit	3.52	(.72)	3.52	(.72)
Coordinate with AJC	3.49	(.68)	2.84	(.90)
Participate on local interagency transition teams	3.49	(.66)	3.21	(.80)
Arrange for self-advocacy training	3.45	(.69)	2.88	(.83)
*Attend IEP meetings	3.40	(.75)	3.40	(.79)
Attend person-centered meetings	3.36	(.73)	3.07	(.84)
Involve employers in transition process	3.32	(.78)	2.50	(.92)
Collaborate with LEAs on post-school outcome indicators	3.06	(.82)	2.71	(.95)

Note. * $p < .01$ for Preparedness means by caseload proportion; **Bold** = PreETS activities

Are there differences between VR counselor perception of importance of skills and their preparation to perform them?

There was a difference between ratings of Importance and Preparation for all but two of the items. Examination of mean differences between the two scales indicated the largest were for involving employers in the transition process (.82), securing/offering work-based learning experiences (.75), and collaborating with workforce development centers or AJCs (.63). These differences suggest that VR counselors rate the Importance of transition items highly, but rate their Preparation or capacity to perform these practices significantly lower.

What do the VR counselors identify as the major barrier to implementing effective transition practices?

The most frequently cited barrier was time and case management challenges (20.4%), followed by lack of access to transportation for consumers (15.6%), and lack of viable employment options in the geographical area (11%). Counselors with specialized caseloads perceived significantly fewer barriers in the following four areas: severity of the youth's disability; lack of collaboration with LEAs or adult service providers; need for additional training, and difficulty in engaging youth in VR services.

Implications

This study suggests several areas of importance to how VR counselors are prepared for and supported to do their jobs. One implication worthy of attention is the discrepancy between what VR counselors think is most important and what they are prepared to do, particularly those practices and skills related to Pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) in WIOA. Two of the five Pre-ETS categories (work-based learning experiences and self-advocacy training) were rated below three on a four-point scale (moderate to little preparation), even though counselors generally endorsed them as important. This suggests that while VR counselors acknowledge the importance of some Pre-ETS practices and skills over others, gaps between what counselors consider important and how prepared they are to perform them suggest the need for ongoing professional development and training.

A second implication for policy and practice is the relationship between caseload proportion devoted to students and youth with disabilities and perceptions of preparedness to perform transition-related practices. As SVRAs implement their Pre-ETS options for students with disabilities, the issue of caseload specialization, that is specific VR counselors dedicated to Pre-ETS delivery and monitoring, may shift caseload practices among SVRAs. Caseload specialization may also mitigate some of the barriers identified by this sample regarding having sufficient time and caseload resources to improve service delivery to this population.

Finally, this study highlights the need for improving VR counselors' capacity regarding employment-related services. For example, three of the items on the *VR Transition Practices Scales* directly related to improving employment: securing paid employment, involving employers in transition services, and coordinating with American Job Centers (AJCs). All were rated by this sample as less than 'moderately prepared' by this sample. This suggests more training and professional development needs to be devoted to these areas.

Future Research

Because paid employment during secondary school is one of the most robust predictors of post-school outcomes (Carter et al., 2012; Haber et al., 2016; Wehman et al., 2015), we need to understand more specifically the perceived challenges VR counselors encounter in achieving it. Additional research needs to be conducted relating caseload specialization to transitioning youths' post school outcomes in vocational rehabilitation to assist in executing new VR agency policies. The authors are currently conducting follow up research to address these elements.

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