



Technical Brief #7

Focus group findings from vocational rehabilitation (VR) staff and young adults with disabilities: Improving VR counseling services for transition-aged youth

Overview

The Knowledge Translation for Employment Research (KTER) Center (<http://www.kter.org>) at American Institutes for Research (AIR) is funded to test, in vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency settings, a knowledge broker model in which individuals are positioned to bridge the worlds of research and practice (Long, Cunningham and Braithwaite, 2013). As part of preparing the VR knowledge brokers, who will be known to the agency staff as “research liaisons,” the KTER Center will recruit and train VR supervisors on specific areas of research, one of which is assisting transition-aged youth with disabilities in identifying and maintaining employment.

To guide content development for the upcoming training, the KTER Center engages in several forms of outreach to VR stakeholders. The Center works closely with members of its [Technical Working Group \(TWG\)](#), consults regularly with its partners at the [Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation \(CSAVR\)](#), and presents at conferences VR staff attend. As part of this set of activities designed to identify informational needs, KTER conducted focus groups with individuals receiving vocational rehabilitation (VR) services and counselors in State VR agencies.

Between October and December 2016, KTER researchers conducted three telephone focus groups. The team recruited individuals who were working for a VR agency and providing counseling services to transition-aged youth with disabilities. There was a lot of interest in participating in the focus groups so KTER conducted two of them with a total of 14 counselors. A third group was held with four young adults with a wide variety of disabilities. All of them were 18 to 24 years old and had experience with VR services. Across all three focus groups, nine States were represented.

The focus groups with VR staff addressed what VR counselors consider to be most important regarding what they do, and need to do, to help youth with disabilities to find and keep employment successfully. The focus group with youth in transition addressed what VR counselors could do to support them in finding and maintaining a job, as well as their challenges, needed accommodations, and awareness of employment opportunities. The facilitator of each focus group recorded the audio of the session. The audio was transcribed to text. Two members of the research team analyzed the content and organized the data into themes (outlined below). Project leaders from KTER and members of KTER’s [Technical Working Group](#) reviewed and finalized the analyses.

Major Themes Identified by Recipients of VR Services

The importance of understanding the needs of transition-aged youth. Young adults with disabilities participating in the groups reported that VR counselors were helpful when they described how high school differed from work and college, and in some cases, emphasizing attending college over obtaining employment after high school. Participants expressed that they themselves are relatively independent and self-reliant in obtaining employment. However, not all VR counselors understood needs specific to youth, or to having a specific disability. This led to frustration, as expressed, for example, in this comment: *“I was having trouble. They knew I was trying to look for a job, but they didn’t know how to approach it. That’s what it felt like.”* Participants wanted counselors to understand their individual needs as related to workplace accommodations, vocational interests, income levels and experiences at work and school. One participant remarked, *“A lot of people just don’t understand the disability and the community that we live in.”*

Types of desired long-term job supports varied. For long-term services and supports, participants’ experience with VR counselors varied. Some stated that it was beneficial when VR counselors supported them for the first 3 months on the job, gave advice about what to wear to work, and outlined for them the layout of job responsibilities. Some counselors reportedly provided this kind of assistance; it was perceived as a barrier to employment if this support was not offered. Other comments highlighted the value participants gave to VR counselors’ role in advising them about how to negotiate workplace accommodations. Participants sought to develop their communication skills at work in order to ensure that accommodations were specific to them as individuals. It was necessary at times to secure tailored equipment or make modifications to the way work was done to allow, for example, someone with a learning disability to fulfill job requirements.

Seeking and maintaining employment independently. Participants expressed that they can be relatively self-reliant in obtaining employment. When asked if participants knew about potential jobs, all but one reported that they typically found jobs on their own. Two participants similarly found their high school jobs themselves, attributing that to their autonomy. Ironically, in the spirit of ‘sink or swim,’ VR staff turnover was one reported cause of participants’ learning to be more independent in identifying and obtaining employment.

Major Themes Identified by VR Counselors

Multifaceted approach to family support. Three themes emerged from the discussions with VR counselors regarding support for the family. First, counselors pointed out that regularly scheduled meetings were the foundation that created strong relationships with youth with disabilities and their families. Consistent contact led to families relying upon counselors as a trusted resource in developing a strong plan to obtain employment. Second, counselors noted that sometimes they had to encourage family members to be realistic about their aspirations for their child regarding employment or college. Counselors would possibly have to mediate between the youth or young adult and his or her family to reconcile competing expectations. Third, youth with disabilities are on the brink of aging out of services available to children. Focus group participants stressed the importance of conveying information about community resources and public benefits available to adults. In some cases, counselors directly linked youth and their families to a potential resource.

“Conferences, or resource fairs, in which you bring together the exact resources that might be beneficial for specific families. So that instead of just handing off information, and hoping that they will take initiative, and are reaching out to these resources, it's actually having that face-to-face interaction between the resources that might be available to their students.”

Myriad of activities to address long-term support needs. VR counselors were also asked to describe what VR can do to promote long-term employment for individuals with disabilities. VR counselor participants identified activities they currently perform including: conducting job assessments and learning style assessments; evaluating interests; providing training on social skills; providing benefits counseling; identifying the supports necessary to enable an individual to work; providing training on employment expectations; and offering ongoing counseling and coaching. VR counselors valued resources that built their capacity to teach youth how to engage in long-term thinking and planning. Such skills include financial literacy, social skills, and impulse control.

Strategies on empowerment and disability disclosure. VR counselor participants prepared youth for vocational opportunities by talking to them about what kinds of accommodations that would enhance their productivity, and then practiced requesting them. Participants reported that some workers with disabilities would benefit from caution regarding disclosing their disability, and must find the appropriate timing. VR counselors were also concerned that some young workers with disabilities would seek to disclose their disability in order to have a ready excuse for poor performance rather than as a reason to receive an accommodation to perform well on the job. They stressed that disclosing a disability should be tied to requesting an accommodation and striving for high levels of achievement.

VR counselor participants expressed concern that some youth shared too many details about their disability and related functional limitations, to their detriment, and so may risk workplace discrimination. Other individuals refrained from revealing pertinent information about their disability to the point that they were never in a position to ask for appropriate accommodations.

“I've experienced people who are ... so open, and they ... need some training on how to disclose that they have a disability. ... You definitely don't want to go out there and [state] everything that's wrong with you to your employer.”

VR Counselors' Suggestions for Training and Support

- A list of available community resources and services, such as education, internships, job shadowing, mentoring programs, apprenticeships, and other vocational supports and training to foster collaborations with organizations that will hire individuals with disabilities
- Training on conducting an interest inventory and identifying learning styles
- Preparation to train transition-aged youth on disclosing disability and requesting accommodations in the workplace
- Preparation to train transition-aged youth on needed social skills within the workplace
- Preparation to train transition-aged youth on choosing, obtaining, maintaining, and advancing in a job
- Support and training on how best to collaborate with employers around hiring and providing accommodations

Consistency of focus group themes with current research on VR. Overall, these findings underscore much of what disability employment researchers have documented. The call from youth with disabilities for VR counseling tailored to their individual preferences, interests, abilities and backgrounds parallels the findings regarding the success of individualized placement and support (IPS) approaches especially for individuals with psychiatric conditions (Bond, Drake & Luciano, 2015). Similarly, the value for on-the-job supports is consistent with the strong research evidence associated with a supported employment model in enhancing long-term employment outcomes for workers with disabilities of all ages (Burke-Miller et al., 2012). Finally, VR counselors' caution to youth with disabilities to discern carefully when, how and how much information to share about their disability is an enduring issue with which workers with disabilities must grapple, despite legislative efforts to end workplace discrimination (National Collaborative for Workforce and Disability for Youth, 2009).

References

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