

How Can Vocational Counselors Improve Employment Outcomes among Students with Disabilities?

Improving Employment Outcomes through Evidence-Based Practices

Frentzel E, Geyman Z, Nye C, Rasmussen J, Salazar AL, Murphy KM, Newman M, and Scalia E

2018

Why focus on improving employment outcomes for students with disabilities?

Students with disabilities who are looking for employment often face many challenges.^{1 2 3} They may lack work experience, social skills, and transportation that allows them to travel to and from their job. Among students with disabilities who have been out of high school between 1 and 4 years, 58 percent work full time at their current or last job. Of students without disabilities who have been out of high school for the same amount of time, 80 percent work full time.⁴

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act has responded to the challenges that these students face. This act requires that vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies dedicate at least 15 percent of the money they have received from the federal government to offering pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) to students with disabilities. These students must qualify for, or possibly qualify for, VR services.⁵ Pre-ETS includes five elements:

1. Counseling that focuses on exploring different job opportunities
2. Learning that takes place on the job
3. Counseling about opportunities to enroll in comprehensive transition or educational programs after high school
4. Training that helps students with disabilities prepare for the workplace by developing social and independent living skills
5. Training that helps students learn to speak up for oneself and make decisions without feeling pressure to do things a certain way (known as *self-advocacy*)

Vocational rehabilitation counselors play an important role in providing opportunities to students with disabilities. This scoping review identifies practices that are based on evidence. It also describes methods that VR counselors may use to improve employment outcomes for students with disabilities. A *scoping review* is a type of report that contains research that has been gathered on a certain subject. Scoping reviews “can be used to map the key concepts underpinning a research area.”⁶

What does the research say?

The research uncovered several themes. These themes can help VR counselors use different approaches to help students with disabilities find and keep a job after high school. We have organized the themes by the five pre-employment transition services.

Job Exploration Counseling

The scoping review revealed four themes related to job exploration counseling and good practice: (1) career goal development, (2) family involvement, (3) cultural competence, and (4) teamwork and cooperation between agencies.

Career goal development supports future work experiences.^{7 8 9 10}
¹¹ VR counselors can help students develop goals for life after high school through the individualized education plans (IEPs) that they received at their school. Counselors may use IEPs to share insights about employment opportunities and education and training that are needed for certain jobs.

Communicating with families of students with disabilities can help in making employment decisions.^{2 10 12 13 14} VR counselors work with parents and families to share information about employment, education, and training options for each person with a disability. Research shows that families who have good communication are a positive factor in planning for a career and making the transition from high school to employment.

Cultural competence is an important quality for VR counselors.¹²
^{13 14 15} Students with disabilities often have very different cultural and language needs. VR counselors should consider the factors that can affect the process of getting and keeping a job. These factors include home environment, neighborhood, language barriers, and economic conditions. It is very important to involve the families of a diverse population of students with disabilities. VR counselors should be sensitive to the basic survival needs of the family. The family may depend on the income from a student's job. VR counselors must consider this fact when they come up with a transition plan.

A working relationship among rehabilitation professionals, students with disabilities, families, and the school system is very important for helping students with disabilities find and keep a job after high school.^{3 7 10 11 14 15 16 17 18 19 20} VR counselors have a key role in these partnerships. They help smooth out the transition process and work through employment challenges that these students face after high school.

What Can VR Counselors Do?

- Start working with schools as early as possible to identify and create activities that can help with career exploration. For example, have students identify their career goals.
- Speak to families in a way that shows you respect and understand their values and opinions.
- Learn about the home life and cultural background of students with disabilities.
- Come up with ways to identify partners who can help students with disabilities make a successful transition from school to work.

Work-Based Learning

This review identified three themes related to learning that happens on the job. These include (1) previous work experience, (2) the effect of Social Security income payments on employment, and (3) mentoring and other social supports that employers provide in the work environment.

Previous or early work experience supports employment for students with disabilities.^{2 7 16 21 22 23 24 25 26} Holding a paying job during high school predicts employment after graduation. In addition, studies cite internships and other related practices as a good way to gain work experience. VR counselors who took part in a series of focus groups recommended that students with disabilities develop and practice their interviewing, communication, and job readiness skills in a variety of ways. These include job shadowing, volunteer work, work activities sponsored by the school, and more.

Supplemental Security Income can discourage employment among students with disabilities.^{16 23 25 27} Supplemental Security Income payments limit earning potential, and they are a key barrier to employment. Changes to some Social Security income rules may lead to better employment outcomes. VR counselors should carefully weigh the positives and negatives of Supplemental Security Income payments when they discuss the topic with students.

Work-based social supports such as mentoring and role modeling can lead to successful employment.^{2 12 24 28 29} Peer mentors and advocates can students build confidence and develop positive social skills. Mentoring and other work-based social supports include advocates who support students with disabilities in a workplace setting. These can include formal mentors, formal role models, or any person who is able to advocate for students with disabilities. VR counselors should be aware of the kinds of social supports that exist for students with disabilities. They should also develop ways to identify people who might serve as role models, mentors, or advocates.

What Can VR Counselors Do?

- Help students identify internships, volunteer activities, and short-term jobs that might be a good fit for them.
- Carefully weigh the positives and negatives of Supplemental Security Income payments and how these affect employment.
- Be aware of the social supports that exist and develop ways to identify possible role models, mentors, and advocates.

Work-Force Readiness

The scoping review uncovered three themes related to workforce readiness: (1) helping students with disabilities develop communication skills for job interviews, (2) giving them the support they need to build their social skills, and (3) helping students become familiar with different kinds of transportation that will enable them travel to work.

Social and communication/interview skills are important in helping students with disabilities gain employment.^{2 12 21 23 28 29}

^{30 31 32 33} Communication skills are important to these students. These skills predict successful employment after high school and college. VR counselors should use exercises such as mock or “pretend” interviews to help students with disabilities practice their speaking and listening skills. During these exercises, students also learn good posture and body language habits.

Social skills training for students with disabilities is related to higher work performance and success with coworkers, employers, and customers.^{2 23 28 29 31 33}

Also, social activities that involve interactions with other students are important for employment after high school and college. Social skills cover a wide range of different skill sets. It is important for VR counselors to be able to identify the kinds of social skills their students with disabilities need to improve, as well as opportunities to improve those skills.

The ability to use different kinds of transportation and to travel independently are positive predictors of employment after high school and college.^{2 21 23 28 29 30 31} VR counselors should help their students with disabilities become familiar with different forms of transportation. This could involve practice taking the bus, train, or other ways of getting to work.

What Can VR Counselors Do?

- Use communication exercises (for example, mock interviews) to help students with disabilities gain the skills they need for employment.
- Identify which social skills need improvement and opportunities available to improve them.
- Help students with disabilities become familiar with different kinds of transportation.

Instruction in Self-Advocacy

Three themes related to instruction self-advocacy emerged from this review: (1) self-determination, (2) disclosure, and (3) workplace accommodations. Each theme is discussed in more detail next.

Self-determination skills are linked to a person's quality of life. They can lead to greater satisfaction, competence and productivity, empowerment and independence, and social belonging.^{2 9 21 23 25 30 34 35 36 37} Self-determination is the ability to plan, make decisions, and carry out the activities that one considers to be important. Training in self-determination teaches students with disabilities about potential accommodations and their rights if they encounter discrimination in the workplace.

Accommodations are adjustments that employers make to job duties or the work environment. These kinds of adjustments give people with disabilities equal opportunities in the workplace and help them perform their jobs to the same extent as people without disabilities. VR counselors should look for and suggest opportunities that will allow students to exercise their decision-making skills. These could include having students create academic or career goals, develop schedules, and think through their ambitions beyond high school.

Disclosure is the act of telling or revealing something about oneself. Disclosure plays a factor in employment.^{2 11 13 22 28 30 32 35 37 38} Students who receive an orientation to the process of moving, or making the transition, from high school are more likely to disclose a disability early in their college career. Students who disclose their disability are more likely to remain employed after high school and college. Orientation services that help students with disabilities transition from high school should inform them about the kinds of services available to them after graduation. Those services may be offered at colleges, at trade schools, and in the workplace. These kinds of services must teach students that they can use these services only if they disclose their disability.

The ability to request appropriate *workplace accommodations* is a skill that can help students with disabilities find and keep employment.^{2 11 30 38} Students with disabilities should be engaged in activities that help them identify possible accommodations to support their goal of gainful employment. This might include going over with students what accommodations are available in the workplace and having them identify what accommodations they need to succeed. Having students practice asking for workplace accommodations in mock settings might also help them develop the self-advocacy skills they need to make these types of requests.

What Can VR Counselors Do?

- Help plan activities that encourage self-determination (that is, activities related to thinking through goals beyond high school).
- Make sure that students have access to a transition planning process that helps them on multiple levels.
- Make sure that students are aware of the accommodations that are available to them in the workplace.

Where does the evidence come from?

This scoping review was conducted from research articles and research-based products (toolkits and training materials) published between 1998 and 2017. This date range was selected because the Workforce Investment Act was introduced in 1998. To filter out less relevant research, the search strategy included only published and gray literature from 1998 through February 2017. Two independent reviewers reviewed all abstracts and titles of the search results for relevance. After a list of included studies was determined, a full-text review was performed and relevant information was extracted. The research articles and products included different types of studies from interviews, focus groups, surveys, and large studies to capture the breadth and depth of guidance on best practices. Of 96 articles and products reviewed, 34 were relevant to students with disabilities and employment outcomes for this population.

This research was carried out under grant number 90DP0077 from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

Copyright © 2018 by American Institutes for Research

¹ Bouck EC, Joshi GS. Does curriculum matter for secondary students with autism spectrum disorders: analyzing the NLTS2. *J Autism Dev Disord*. 2015 May;45(5):1204-12.

² Crudden A. Transition to employment for students with visual impairments: components for success. *J Vis Impair Blind*. 2012;106(7):389-399.

³ Dong S, Fabian E, Luecking RG. Impacts of school structural factors and student factors on employment outcomes for youth with disabilities in transition. *Rehabil Couns Bull*. 2016;59(4):224-234.

⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Division of Labor Force Statistics [Internet]. (2017). College enrollment and work activity of high school graduates news release. Available from: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgec.htm>

⁵ Amendment to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. P. L. 93–112, title I, §113, as added P. L. 113–128, title IV, §422, July 22, 2014, 128 Stat. 1657. Available from: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-113publ128/html/PLAW-113publ128.htm>

⁶ Peters M, Godfrey C, McInerney P, Soares C, Khalil H, Parker D. The Joanna Briggs Institute Reviewers' Manual 2015: methodology for JBI Scoping Reviews.

⁷ Fabian ES. Urban youth with disabilities: factors affecting transition employment. *Rehabil Couns Bull*. 2007;50(3):130-138.

⁸ Jamieson M, Paterson J, Krupa T, Topping A. Determining the effectiveness of thresholds, an intervention to enhance the career development of young people with physical disabilities. *Work*. 1998;11(1):43-55.

⁹ Brewer D, Erickson W, Karpur A, Unger D, Sukyeong P, Malzer V. Evaluation of a Multi-site Transition to Adulthood Program for Youth with Disabilities. *J Rehabil*. 2011;77(3):3-13.

-
- ¹⁰ Luecking DM, Luecking RG. Translating research into a seamless transition model. *Career Dev Transit Except Individ.* 2015;38(1):4-13.
- ¹¹ Rothman T, Maldonado JM, Rothman H. Building self-confidence and future career success through a pre-college transition program for individuals with disabilities. *J Vocat Rehabil.* 2008;28(2):73-83.
- ¹² Stone RA, Delman J, McKay CE, Smith LM. Appealing Features of Vocational Support Services for Hispanic and non-Hispanic Transition Age Youth and Young Adults with Serious Mental Health Conditions. *J Behav Health Serv Res.* 2015 Oct;42(4):452-65.
- ¹³ Greene G. Transition of culturally and linguistically diverse youth with disabilities: challenges and opportunities. *J Vocat Rehabil.* 2014;40(3):239-245.
- ¹⁴ Tilson G, Simonsen M. The personnel factor: exploring the personal attributes of highly successful employment specialists who work with transition-age youth. *J Vocat Rehabil.* 2013;38(2):125-137.
- ¹⁵ Awsumb JM, Balcazar FE, Alvarado F. Vocational rehabilitation transition outcomes of youth with disabilities from a Midwestern state. *Rehabil Res, Policy, and Educ.* 2016;30(1):48-6.
- ¹⁶ Giesen JM, Cavanaugh BS. Transition-age youths with visual impairments in vocational rehabilitation: a new look at competitive outcomes and services. *J Vis Impair Blind.* 2012;106(8):475-487.
- ¹⁷ Plotner AJ, Trach JS, Strauser DR. Vocational rehabilitation counselors' identified transition competencies: perceived importance, frequency, and preparedness. *Rehabil Couns Bull.* 2012;55(3):135-143.
- ¹⁸ Plotner AJ, Trach JS, Oertle KM, Fleming AR. Differences in service delivery between transition VR counselors and general VR counselors. *Rehabil Couns Bull.* 2014;57(2):109-115.
- ¹⁹ Izzo MV. The effects of transition services on outcome measures of employment for vocational students with disabilities [dissertation]. [Columbus]: Ohio State University; 1998. 197 p.
- ²⁰ Povenmire-Kirk T, Diegelmann K, Crump K, Schnorr C, Test D, Flowers C, et al. Implementing CIRCLES: a new model for interagency collaboration in transition planning. *J Vocat Rehabil.* 2015;42(1):51-65.
- ²¹ Simonsen ML, Neubert DA. Transitioning youth with intellectual and other developmental disabilities: predicting community employment outcomes. *Career Dev Transit Except Individ.* 2013;36(3):188-198.
- ²² Wehman P, Sima AP, Ketchum J, West MD, Chan F, Luecking R. Predictors of successful transition from school to employment for youth with disabilities. *J Occup Rehabil.* 2015 Jun;25(2):323-34.
- ²³ McDonnall MM. Predictors of employment for youths with visual impairments: findings from the second national longitudinal transition study (duplicate). *J Vis Impair Blind.* 2011;105(8):453-466.
- ²⁴ Madaus JM. Improving the transition to career for college students with learning disabilities: suggestions from graduates. *J Postsecond Educ Disabil.* 2006;19(1):85-93.
- ²⁵ Luecking RG, Wittenburg D. Providing supports to youth with disabilities transitioning to adulthood: case descriptions from the youth transition demonstration. *J Vocat Rehabil.* 2009;30(3):241-251.
- ²⁶ Shandra CL, Hogan DP. School-to-work program participation and the post-high school employment of young adults with disabilities. *J Vocat Rehabil.* 2008;29(2):117-130.
- ²⁷ Hemmeter J. Earnings and disability program participation of youth transition demonstration participants after 24 months. *Soc Secur Bull.* 2014;74(1):1-25.
- ²⁸ Lindsay S, Adams T, McDougall C, Sanford R. Skill development in an employment-training program for adolescents with disabilities. *Disabil Rehabil.* 2012;34(3):228-37.
- ²⁹ Verhoef JA, Roebroek ME, van Schaardenburgh N, Floothuis MC, Miedema HS. Improved occupational performance of young adults with a physical disability after a vocational rehabilitation intervention. *J Occup Rehabil.* 2014;24(1):42-51.
- ³⁰ Carter EW, Austin D, Trainor AA. Factors associated with the early work experiences of adolescents with severe disabilities. *Intellect Dev Disabil.* 2011 Aug;49(4):233-47.
- ³¹ Noel VA, Oulvey E, Drake RE, Bond GR. Barriers to Employment for Transition-age Youth with Developmental and Psychiatric Disabilities. *Adm Policy Ment Health.* 2017 May;44(3):354-358.
- ³² Lindsay S, DePape AM. Exploring differences in the content of job interviews between youth with and without a physical disability. *PLoS One.* 2015;10(3):e0122084.
- ³³ Luft P. Employment and independent living skills of public school high school deaf students: analyses of the transition competence battery response patterns. *J Am Deaf Rehabil Assoc (JADARA).* 2012;45(3):292-313.
- ³⁴ McDonnall MC, Crudden A. Factors affecting the successful employment of transition-age youths with visual impairments. *J Vis Impair Blind.* 2009; 103(6):329-341.

³⁵ Newman LA, Madaus JW, Javitz HS. Effect of transition planning on postsecondary support receipt by students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*. 2016;82(4):497-514.

³⁶ Bal MI, Sattoe JN, van Schaardenburgh NR, Floothuis MC, Roebroek ME, Miedema HS. A vocational rehabilitation intervention for young adults with physical disabilities: participants' perception of beneficial attributes. *Child Care Health Dev*. 2017;43(1):114-125.

³⁷ Foley KR, Dyke P, Girdler S, Bourke J, Leonard H. Young adults with intellectual disability transitioning from school to post-school: a literature review framed within the ICF. *Disabil Rehabil*. 2012;34(20):1747-64.

³⁸ Lindsay S, McDougall C, Sanford R. Disclosure, accommodations and self-care at work among adolescents with disabilities. *Disabil Rehabil*. 2013;35(26):2227-36.