

Collaboration Between VR and Higher Education: Lessons from Four Case Studies

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BACKGROUND

Given the recent emphasis on expanding postsecondary education (PSE) opportunities for students with intellectual disability (ID) in legislation and funding (HEOA, 2008), it has become more important than ever to identify how students with disabilities are or are not supported to access postsecondary education. In particular, current literature is lacking research focused on the role of vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs in promoting postsecondary education for students with intellectual disabilities and autism. To gain a better understanding of how VR and higher education entities can work together to support such students, a team from Think College conducted case studies of four higher education programs across the country that had established effective partnerships with VR.

The study had 4 overall research questions: (1) How are higher education programs partnering with VR to support individuals with ID and/or autism? (2) How is the higher education-VR relationship established and maintained? (3) What financial, logistical, and case management supports does VR provide to higher education programs and students? (4) How do higher education/VR partnerships enhance supports and outcomes for individuals with ID and/or autism? This publication focuses specifically on findings related to the first two research questions.

METHOD

This project used case studies to examine effective VR partnerships with existing higher education programs for students with ID and/or autism. Using data collected by Think College on Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID), as well as guidance from the team's extensive network of contacts in inclusive higher education, four programs across the country were identified that had exemplary partnerships with VR.

Project staff conducted one 2-3 day site visit at each case study location. Across the four site visits, 48 interviews were conducted with an array of key informants, including higher education program staff, VR staff, students, and parents. The team also collected any documentation that might shed further light on each partnership, including memoranda of agreement, meeting notes, and any other related materials. Qualitative analysis, including thematic coding and memo writing, was conducted by a team of three researchers who met regularly to compare specific passages and evolve the coding themes and findings (Charmaz, 2000). All analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti.

RESULTS

How are higher education programs partnering with VR to support individuals with ID and/or autism?

Several key elements of the TPSID/VR partnership emerged from our case studies. One was building the partnership on a **formal contract for services**. Each of the four sites had such a contract. In two cases, this was a contract specifically for providing a higher education program, while in the other two, supports for higher education participation were built into a pre-existing contractual relationship in which the college served as a community rehabilitation program (CRP).

Formal communication structures were also part of each partnership. These structures were important for highlighting both parties' commitment to the partnership and maintaining open lines of communication. They took various forms including joint events, site visits, and presentations; VR representation on the college programs' advisory boards; regularly scheduled meetings of all staff (quarterly, monthly, or twice a year).

A third element was **effective use of documentation**. Since the colleges and VR agencies have such different goals, systems, and standards, effectively managing required documentation was an important part of the partnership. For example, VR requires certain documentation to pay for college and IHE staff sometimes worked with students to ensure that paperwork is in place. Other documentation was required or negotiated as part of the contract for services between VR and IHE (for example, reporting on services provided, job placement documentation).

Partnerships also included **processes for referral and intake** to ensure students were connected with both VR and the IHE. Sometimes students were referred to postsecondary education by a VR counselor and/or were already connected with VR prior to college; more often, the college identified and referred incoming students to VR.

How is the higher education-VR relationship established and maintained?

In each of our four case examples, the **partnership around inclusive higher education grew out of pre-existing relationships**. For example, three of the four higher education programs had contracts for VR services extending back 15 years or more. These contracts initially were focused on providing employment, therapy, or other services, and evolved to encompass higher education

The ongoing success of the relationship was **based on shared values, mutual respect, and an understanding of each other's goals and processes**. While the overarching values (i.e., supporting students' success) were the same, specific goals and processes differed between VR and higher education. Understanding these differences facilitated working together more effectively. A particular component of these shared values has **having VR buy-in to the value of higher education**, which required making a clear connection to employment goals and outcomes.

Ongoing communication was essential to maintaining the relationship, with the informal communication that happens between program staff and VR staff on a daily basis coming through as even more important than the formal communication mechanisms described above. Staff reached out to each other frequently by email, phone, or text for consultation or updates. This practice, which was common across all four sites, was one of the most frequently cited factors in a good partnership among both IHE and VR staff.

Staff also described **having and/or cultivating personal relationships** as a factor for successful collaboration. Ultimately, an ongoing commitment to communication and building relationships led to a sense of **VR and IHE staff working as one team**, with a shared mission of serving students in a person-centered manner.

CONCLUSION

Partnerships between vocational rehabilitation and higher education program can play an important role in supporting students with ID and/or autism before, during, and after college. An examination of several such partnerships revealed that they generally are founded upon a strong formal framework, including elements such as contracts for services, regular meeting times, and processes for effective documentation. Perhaps even more essential, however, are the relationships, values, and informal communication patterns that ensure on-the-ground implementation and ongoing success.

REFERENCE

Charmaz, K. (2000). Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods. In Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*, 2nd edition (pp.509-535). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

ABOUT THE STUDY

This study was conducted as part of the RRTC on VR and Youth (<http://vrpracticesandyouth.org/>). Think College study team members included: Nerlie Blackburn, Daria Domin, Meg Grigal, Debra Hart, Jennifer Sulewski, and Russ Thelin.

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