

Guest Editorial

Fortune favors the bold: Special series on the vocational rehabilitation technical assistance center for quality employment

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Work is a central and necessary component to the formation of identity. It is a defining process that shapes individuals' perceptions of themselves, their relationships with others, and their integration in society (Strauser, 2020; Wehman, Taylor, Brooke, Avellone, et al., 2018). However, not all have equal access to the academic training, networks, and social capital necessary to participate in the workforce and experience dramatic limits in their opportunities to engage in the workforce. Persons with disabilities have disproportionately lower labor force participation rates relative to those without disabilities. Further, the labor force participation disparity is even greater among those with the most significant disabilities and traditionally underserved populations (U.S. Department of Labor [USDOL], 2019a). In 2019, approximately 80% of persons with disabilities remained outside the labor force compared with 30% of people without a dis-

ability and the unemployment rate for persons with disabilities was more than double the rate of those without a disability (USDOL, 2019b). This employment gap has widened over the last decade, despite increasing national employment rates (Houtenville & Boege, 2019).

The barriers facing persons with the most significant disabilities, youth with disabilities, and traditionally underserved populations systematically restrain their opportunities for employment. Lack of training or education, transportation, job accommodations, and career counseling, coupled with attitudinal factors such as employer, serve to limit the access of persons with disabilities to employment opportunities (Iwanaga, Chan, Tansey, Ditchman, & Kaya, 2021; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). As a result, persons with disabilities, particularly youth, are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as their peers without disabilities (Houtenville & Boege, 2019). To address low labor force participation of persons with disabilities, leaders of state vocational rehabilitation agencies (SVRA) have indi-

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cated a lack of evidence-based practices, or practices identified through applied research, and subsequent knowledge translation and transfer to SVRAs through technical assistance (Tansey & Anderson, 2017).

A challenge has been previously voiced to move beyond admiring the problem and toward action in addressing the social inequities, service limitations, and overall capacity to address the known issues of unemployment and underemployment of persons with disabilities (Tansey, Dutta, Kundu, & Chan, 2016). During the time since this call to action, the world has faced the COVID-19 pandemic and the many challenges and disruptions associated with it. These challenges have accelerated the issues associated with participation in services provided by SVRAs and inclusion in the U.S. labor market (Levine, Rumrill, Espinosa, & Sheppard-Jones, 2022; Schall, Brooke, Rounds, & Lynch, 2021) as well as impacted well-being of persons with disabilities (Thimbriel, Urkmez, Lee, & Umucu, 2022; Umucu, Tansey, Brooks, & Lee, 2021).

Continued admiration of the struggles experienced by persons with disabilities will only result in further decline in workforce participation despite the current national labor shortage during which businesses have been more open to recruit and retain persons with disabilities (Herson, 2021; Kuligowski, 2022; Small Business Administration, 2022). To capitalize on the shift in business' labor needs and effectively change an institutionalized low level of workforce participation, and support SVRAs and the community rehabilitation providers engaged in addressing this issue, bold action is required. Being bold in addressing the systemic unemployment and underemployment of persons with disabilities requires recognizing more than the underlying causes perpetuating this condition. Rather, bold action requires collaboration and coordination between persons with disabilities, practitioners, educators, researchers, federal and state agencies, and other stakeholders to identify best practices, support training needs of professionals, provide technical assistance that focuses on implementation of those practices, and facilitate structures that promote sustainability and progression of employment outcomes of persons with disabilities.

To support SVRAs in their vocational rehabilitation efforts with individuals with disabilities, the Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Employment (VRTAC-QE) seeks to upgrade and increase their competencies, skills, and knowledge of best practices. Likewise, the VRTAC-QE will engage SVRA affiliates in tech-

nical assistance in order to enhance their capacity to implement and sustain employment strategies and supporting practices to enable individuals with disabilities to achieve competitive integrated employment. The first step in taking action toward these goals occurred in 2020 via a recent national needs assessment, conducted by the VRTAC-QE, to identify areas under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) that SVRAs and their affiliates required technical assistance (Bishop, Zhou, Iwanaga, Chan, & Tansey, 2021) as part of a larger comprehensive review that also included an examination of SVRA documents (i.e., comprehensive statewide needs assessments, Rehabilitation Services Administration monitoring plans, and statewide comprehensive plans), reviews of available literature, and analysis of RSA 911 data. Essential to this investigation was collaboration. The needs assessment collaboration was led by the Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management (VRTAC-QM) and counted the National Technical Assistance Center for Transitional-Collaboration (NTACT-C). The collaboration with these centers created an efficient mechanism to receive input from SVRA leadership to help guide the development of technical assistance programs. Likewise, collaboration between the University of Wisconsin VRTAC-QE and the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) on Employer Practices, the VCU RRTC on Employment of Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities (RRTC-Transition), the VCU RRTC Employment of Individuals with Intellectual and Development Disabilities (RRTC-IDD), the VCU Disability and Rehabilitation Research Project on Customized Employment, and the Center on Self-Employment (CSE) was essential in completing the research and knowledge translation for inclusion in this special series. Central to this effort were the shared vision across these projects of working together to provide SVRAs, researchers, and educators with the necessary information on the current state of the literature or services and provide empirical investigations capable of identifying specific interventions to improve employment entry.

Finally, it was the bold action of the editors of the four journals—*Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation; Rehabilitation Research, Policy, and Education; Rehabilitation Counselor and Educators Journal; and Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*—to work together on creating this special series. This coordinated effort by editors to review submissions, identify

Table 1
VRTAC-QE partners and areas of expertise

Partner	Expertise
Virginia Commonwealth University	Supported employment, customized employment, reducing subminimum wage
University of Kentucky-Human Development Institute	Customized training, labor market analysis, business engagement, transportation
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	Apprenticeships, work-based learning experiences, career development
Florida Atlantic University	Self-employment, psychiatric rehabilitation
University of Texas at El Paso	Outreach to Veterans, outreach to Hispanic communities
South Carolina State University	Outreach to African American communities, disaster preparedness, outreach to faith-based communities
Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation/the NET Autism Workforce	Business relationships
Yolbe	Business outreach, business supports Social capital, social media, internet-based outreach strategies

those manuscripts for their specific journal, and ultimately their patience and commitment to the process has resulted in a special series unlike any previous issue. Although shared editorials, or even articles, across journals is not a novel approach, working collaboratively to bring the extensive literature together in this series speaks to their willingness to move beyond historical practices and take bold action to inform and shape practice and research in rehabilitation counseling.

The VRTAC-QE, led by the University of Wisconsin-Madison, proposed an innovative collaboration with experts from respective areas from in public and private entities to bring the state-of-the-science into technical assistance efforts. This collaboration with partners identified in Table 1 brings their longstanding research and applied service portfolios under a single center with the intention of increasing the knowledge transfer from research to practice with SVRAs.

This partnership brings together the research, knowledge, leadership, and practice capacities of these institutions to provide SVRAs with technical assistance and training. Collectively, they represent an unparalleled consortium of researchers and practitioners engaged in the identification, knowledge

translation, and implementation of evidence-based, promising, or emerging practices in vocational rehabilitation. These institutions, coupled with the projects identified above, are responsible for the content of this special series.

Critical to the implementation of the VRTAC-QE and the development of the special series is the VRTAC-QE Steering Committee. This committee serves to advance the conceptualization, implementation, and evaluation of the VRTAC-QE activities toward its overarching goal of increasing the capacity of SVRAs to support persons with disabilities in their efforts to obtain and retain high quality employment. The Steering Committee was instrumental in bringing this special series to print as many served as reviewers for the articles described below—offering their expertise and knowledge to assist authors in the development of their final submissions. These articles were incorporated into the special series spanning the journals of *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, *Rehabilitation Counselors and Educators Journal*, *Rehabilitation Research, Policy and Education*, and the *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*. Through the coordination among the journal editors, the VRTAC-QE was able to provide these works in an accelerated time frame to support the implementation of current, best practices in the provision of technical assistance and toward building capacity of SVRAs.

1. Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation

The Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation (JVR) includes seven articles in the special series. The article by Schutz and colleagues reaffirms the importance of paid work experiences on the career engagement of transition-age youth with disabilities. Through recognition of the value of paid work, these young individuals are more likely to work, and start work earlier in their adulthood. Next, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the service of customized employment was recognized as an intervention available to SVRAs in their efforts to assist persons with most significant disabilities obtain and retain competitive, integrated employment. Riesen et al. provide a detailed overview of customized employment research that precedes the signing of WIOA through the current time period. Through this review, they provide the empirical support of customized employment and the capacity to assist individuals establish and retain meaningful employment. Conversely, supported employment has long been recognized as an evidence-based practice in

vocational rehabilitation. However, the available literature is limited in provision of case-controlled studies of the effectiveness of this intervention on transition-age youth with intellectual disabilities. Iwanaga and collaborators demonstrate through propensity score matching, the benefits of supported employment on transition-age youth with disabilities. The findings clearly demonstrate the use of this intervention and the associated benefits with its implementation.

As indicated earlier in this article, the VRTAC-QE conducted a national needs assessment of SVRA personnel to determine the areas of greatest importance and limited capacity for implementation. Tansey et al. provides an overview of the methodology and findings from that needs assessment that in turn has provided direction and focus to the technical assistance efforts of this Center. In addition, the needs assessment helped direct the focus of the inquiries included in this special series as observed in the number of articles focused on topics such as customized employment, supported employment, career engagement, and employer relationships. In terms of employment, the article by Taylor et al. provides a timely review of the literature regarding practices and outcomes of subminimum wage employment versus competitive employment. In particular, this article provides a timely evaluation of the existing research and strategies to support individuals in their transition from subminimum wage employment. The article by Bezyak et al. is an empirical investigation using RSA 911 data of transportation services and who benefits, or vulnerability in terms of employment at exit, of program participants who receive this service. Regarding SVRA services, a new service, customized employment, was identified under WIOA. The article by Kim et al. explores the use of this service and co-occurring services among the ten states with the highest utilization of customized employment and employment outcomes associated with different service strategies.

The selected articles you will find in JVR are:

Pathways to Paid Work for Youth with Severe Disabilities: Perspectives on Strategies for Success – Michele A. Schutz, M.Ed., Ben Schwartzman, Jessica M. Awsumb, Leah Burgess, Erik W. Carter, & Julie Lounds Taylor

An Updated Review of the Customized Employment Literature – Tim Riesen, Aubrey Snyder, Rachel Byers, Beth Keaton, & Katherine Inge

Effects of Supported Employment on the Competitive Integrated Employment Outcomes of Transition Age and Young Adults with Intellectual Disabilities: A Non-Experimental Causal Comparative Study – Kanako Iwanaga, Jake Hamburg, Jia-Rung Wu, Xiangli Chen, Phillip Rumrill, Paul Wehman, Timothy N. Tansey, & Fong Chan

Vocational Rehabilitation Service Delivery: Technical Assistance Needs of Vocational Rehabilitation Professionals – Timothy N. Tansey, Malachy Bishop, Kanako Iwanaga, Kaiqi Zhou, & Fong Chan

The Efficacy of Competitive Integrated Employment Versus Segregated Employment for Persons with Disabilities: A Systematic Review of Research – Joshua P. Taylor, Lauren Avellone, Paul Wehman, & Valerie Brooke

Characteristics of Individuals with Disabilities Receiving Transportation Services in Vocational Rehabilitation – Jill Bezyak, Cahit Kaya, Sharon Hsu, Kanako Iwanaga, Jia-Rung Wu, Beatrice Lee, Madan Kundu, Fong Chan, & Timothy N. Tansey

Customized Employment as a Pathway to Competitive Integrated Employment: An Analysis of RSA 911 data of State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies with the Highest Use of this Intervention – Jaeyoung Kim, Tim Riesen, Katherine Inge, Beth Keaton, Marcus Weathers, & Timothy N. Tansey

2. Rehabilitation Counselors and Educators Journal

The *Rehabilitation Counselors and Educators Journal* (RCEJ) includes seven articles in the special series. These articles focus on the vocational rehabilitation of select populations and includes scoping reviews, qualitative investigations, and quantitative research. Castruita-Rios et al. conducted an investigation in collaborations between SVRAs, secondary education systems, and/or community organizations to increase vocational engagement and employment of transition-age youth with disabilities. WIOA provides clear direction on the importance of vocational rehabilitation services for transition-age youth with disabilities, both prior to and subsequent of application for adult services, with the goal of increasing employment for these young adults (Degeneffe,

Tucker, & Ahonle, 2022; Grenawalt, et al., 2022). Youth with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD) are often relegated to segregated, subminimum settings as described in the Taylor et al. article in JVR. However, the scoping review provided by Avellone et al. in RCEJ examines work-based learning experiences such as internships and the relationship of these early work experiences to progression to competitive employment. The article by Phillips et al. takes a different focus with a case study investigation into demand-side factors associated with an employment initiative at a manufacturing company. Understanding how to serve businesses through a dual customer model, as well as highlighting how a disability-friendly climate benefits the overall organization, can facilitate a different cost-benefit analysis among corporate executives and human resource personnel regarding the benefits of diversity in hiring practices beyond the direct labor supply advantages. The remaining articles in the RCEJ special series highlight vocational rehabilitation practices for specific populations. For instance, the scoping review article by Bhattarai and Smedema examines the intersection of disability, poverty, and health and provides insights into mechanisms to promote quality of life of persons with disabilities. Jeffrey Meyer reviews data regarding rural migrant farmworkers and the opportunities for SVRAs to support this population. Similarly, Estala-Gutierrez et al. focus on the vocational rehabilitation needs of the fastest growing demographic in the United States: Hispanic/Latinx individuals. Given the growth, and under participation, of this group in vocational rehabilitation, the outreach and engagement strategies described in this article can have an immediate impact on participation if fully implemented. Finally, Emre Umucu provides a detailed overview of the needs of our veterans and opportunities for SVRAs to collaborate with the Veterans Administration (VA) to support these individuals who answered the call to serve in our military. Developing empirically-driven approaches to working with veterans with disabilities can ultimately improve both collaboration and outcomes between SVRAs, the VA, and post-secondary education systems resulting in greater employment opportunities and quality of life for veterans seeking full inclusion in society (Umucu, Chan, Phillips, Tansey, Berven, & Hoyt, 2022).

The selected articles you will find in RCEJ are:

Collaborations to Support Employment Outcomes of Youth with Disabilities – Yazmin

Castruita-Rios, Sara Park, Xiangli Chen, & Timothy N. Tansey

Improving Health of Persons with Disabilities Living in Poverty: A Scoping Review – Muna Bhattarai, MNS & Susan Miller Smedema

A Scoping Review on Internship Programs and Employment Outcomes for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities – Lauren Avellone, Josh Taylor, Whitney Ham, Carol Schall, Paul Wehman, Valerie Brooke, & David Strauser

Autism Initiative in the Industrial Sector: A Case Study – Brian Phillips, Timothy N. Tansey, Deborah Lee, Beatrice Lee, David Geslak, and Xiangli Chen & Prater

Rural Migrant Farmworker Demographics: Implications for Vocational Rehabilitation – Jeffrey Meyer

Vocational Rehabilitation Services for Hispanic Individuals with Disabilities: Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities – Beatrice Lee, Veronica Estala-Gutierrez, & Emre Umucu

Vocational Rehabilitation Services for Veterans with Disabilities: Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities – Emre Umucu

3. Rehabilitation Research, Policy, and Education

For the special series, there are five articles in an upcoming issue of *Rehabilitation Research, Policy, and Education*. The focus of this special series is on transition-age youth with disabilities. The article by Chun et al. is an evaluation of RSA 911 data on entrance of youth into Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math fields. There is a growing interest on seeking advanced career opportunities for youth through vocational rehabilitation services rather than entry level work (Schutz & Carter, 2022). Giving the importance of collaboration to support the entrance into the workforce of youth with disabilities (Gatesy, Koroloff, Marrone, & Davis, 2022), the Lee et al. and Friedman et al. articles identify the primary efforts of two service systems– SVRAs and Secondary Education– and opportunities for these systems to coordinate toward increasing the partic-

ipation of transition-age youth with disabilities in employment. Elias Mpfu builds upon this literature with his theory-driven review of research on promoting employment among neurodiverse individuals. Rounding out the RRPE section of the special series is an article by Chen et al. that is an investigation into employer practices to support the onboarding and retention of persons with disabilities. Through customization of the training process, businesses can increase the likelihood of successful transition into the workforce and facilitate opportunities for advancement.

The selected articles you will find in *Rehabilitation Research, Policy, and Education* are:

STEM Career Pathways for Transition-age Youth with Disabilities – Jina Chun, Kaiqi Zhou, Stuart Rumrill, & Tracy Tittelbach

Effective Secondary Services in Transition-age Youth with Disabilities: A Scoping Review of the Literature: Deborah Lee, May Ramirez, Yazmin Castruita-Rios, & Timothy N. Tansey

Employment Outcomes for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Theory Mapping of the Evidence – Elias Mpfu

Effective Vocational Rehabilitation Services for Transition-aged Youth: Lessons from the Literature – Katherine B. Friedman, Yazmin Castruita Rios, Yunzhen Huang, Susan M. Wiegmann, & Timothy N. Tansey

Employer Practices for Customized Training for Onboarding of People with Disabilities – Xiangli Chen, Jia-Rung Wu, Teresa Ann Grenawalt, Ngonidzashe Mpfu, Fong Chan, & Timothy N. Tansey

Employer Practices for Integrating People with Disabilities into the Workplace: A Scoping Review – Jia Rung Wu, Kanako Iwanaga, Teresa Ann Grenawalt, Ngonidzashe Mpfu, Fong Chan, Beatrice Lee, & Timothy N. Tansey

4. Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin

The last journal in the special series is the *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*. The articles selected for this issue focus primarily on the application of voca-

tional rehabilitation services. The initial article by Brehmer et al. conducts an exploration of the impact of functioning on career development. Recognizing the self-stigma as being material to individual career conceptualization is critical to supporting individuals with disabilities as they engage in vocational services (Kim, 2022). The remaining articles in the issue focus on two underdeveloped vocational opportunities in SVRAs: Customized Employment and Self-Employment. Customized employment, an intervention that has a historical background but only recently incorporated into SVRAs via inclusion in WIOA, has yet to be fully realized as an intervention. Inge et al. provides findings from a national research study aimed at understanding perceptions regarding this intervention and existing barriers to its implementation by SVRAs. Kim et al. investigated the use of customized employment by SVRAs through a review of RSA 911 data. The findings of this study demonstrate the underutilization and uneven outcomes associated with customized employment while exploration the potential causes for these outcomes. To address disparities in service utilization and outcomes associated with customized employment, Riesen and colleagues provide research toward the creation of a fidelity scale to promote consistency in the discovery process under customized employment. The two articles focused on self-employment outcomes of persons served by SVRAs provide equally interesting findings. Sánchez et al. conducted an analysis of RSA 911 data within two time periods to demonstrate the historical difficulties, and successes, in assisting persons with disabilities to engage in self-directed employment activities. Likewise, Frain and colleagues produce a call to action to increase the opportunities for self-employment through cultivation of entrepreneurship programming by SVRAs. Given the changing nature of the U.S. economy, this article provides a bold vision of new directions for vocational rehabilitation service.

The selected articles you will find in the *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin* are:

Differential effects of functioning on the career development of individuals with disabilities – Chelsea Brehmer, David Strauser, Sa Shen, Brian Phillips, John Kosciulek, & Bryan Austin

The Essential Elements of Customized Employment: Results from a National Survey of

Employment Providers – Katherine J. Inge, Adam P. Sima, Tim Riesen, Paul Wehman, & Nancy Brooks-Lane

Use of Customized Employment in State Vocational Rehabilitation Programs: A Retrospective Study 2017-2020 – Jaeyoung Kim, Katherine Inge, Beth Keeton, Tim Riesen, & Timothy N. Tansey

Internal Consistency of the Customized Employment Discovery Fidelity Scale: A Preliminary Study – Tim Riesen, Steve Hall, Beth Keeton, & Aubrey Snyder

Persons with Disabilities in Self-Employment Served by the Federal/State Vocational Rehabilitation System: Differences Between 2011–2013 and 2017–2019 – Jennifer Sánchez, Michael Frain, Ghari Shirley, Devin Rohack, & Deyu Pan

The Time is Ripe for Entrepreneurship in Vocational Rehabilitation: A Four-Pronged Approach to Changing the Landscape for Persons with Disabilities in the Entrepreneurial World – Michael Frain, Devin Rohack, Malachy Bishop, Julianne Frain, & Jennifer Sánchez

Conflict of interest

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