

Guest Editorial

An introduction to this special issue of the Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation: Transition and individual supports in education and employment

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Pre-press 1 February 2023

Published 17 March 2023

The purpose of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is, in part, “to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living” (Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], 2022, para. 7). The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), is “designed to strengthen and improve our nation’s public workforce system and help Americans with barriers to employment, including individuals with disabilities, into high quality careers and help employers hire and retain skilled workers” (Rehabilitation Services Administration, 2022, para. 1).

As recently highlighted by the U.S. Department of Education (ED), the IDEA and WIOA “make clear that transition services require a coordinated set of activities within an outcome-oriented process...”

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that “relies upon active student involvement, family engagement, and cooperative implementation of transition activities, as well as coordination and collaboration between the vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency, the state educational agency (SEA), the local educational agency (LEA), and the school” (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services [OSERS], 2020, para. 3). ED further stated that, “An active partnership among SEAs, LEAs, schools, and VR agencies is beneficial for every student with a disability as well as their families,” and that, “VR agencies and schools should be coordinating outreach efforts and the provision of services for all students with disabilities, as early as possible during the transition planning process...” (OSERS, 2020, para. 4). In theory, then, these laws, working together, should result in improved educational and employment outcomes for people with disabilities. The problem is that laws don’t work together – people do.

After nearly 50 years of implementation and multiplied billions of dollars in Federal funding, we remain far from the outcomes these laws envision. Consider the following. In the year after exiting high school, the median state rate of students who had Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) completing at least one semester of higher education is only 25%

(OSEP, 2021). Sixteen percent of adults with disabilities 21–64 years of age have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 36% of adults without disabilities (Erickson et al., 2022). Thirty-seven percent of individuals with disabilities ages 18–64 are employed, compared to 75% of individuals without disabilities. Median annual earnings for full-time, full-year workers with disabilities ages 18–64 are nearly \$8000 less than earnings for workers without disabilities. Nearly 28% of individuals with disabilities ages 18–64 live in poverty, compared to 12% of individuals without disabilities (Institute on Disability, 2021).

The time for admiring these problems has long passed. The time has come that we must acknowledge the reality that these are precisely the results our systems are designed to produce. If we want different results, our systems must improve, innovate, and change. In some cases, significantly.

While we recognize and appreciate the progress made over the last nearly 50 years, realizing the promise of these landmark pieces of legislation on the scale many of us imagine is going to require more and better of us - at every level. It's going to require that we think, plan, and work differently. It's going to require that we reject contentment with the *status quo* and abandon the complacency it has produced. It's going to require a deeper level and different kind of coordination, collaboration, and cooperation. It's going to require that we relentlessly pursue improvement, innovation, and change. It's going to require us to demonstrate that we care more about preparing people than we do about preserving systems.

Certain characteristics are present in individuals and teams that engage in, lead, and model efforts that result in improved outcomes for people with disabilities, as well as improvement in the systems that serve them. They are discontent with repeating cycle after cycle of marginal improvement at best, while others around them seem content with the *status quo*, or even intent on preserving it. They have become increasingly aware of the jarring reality that their system is designed to produce the results it is getting. They focus on improving the system for the sake of those they serve, and not on preserving the system for the sake of the system. They are inclined to confront things standing in the way of people with disabilities having equal opportunity to succeed. This includes the courage to question policies, practices, and even laws that fail to deliver on the promises they make, no matter how well-intended they may be. They do not equate the act of achieving compliance as the sole indicator of success. While they rightly understand

compliance with the law to be basic and foundational, they know compliance alone does not improve outcomes. They are compelled to make it easier and not harder for individuals and families to navigate disparate systems serving people with disabilities. As a result, they are committed to effective, scaled, and sustained coordination, cooperation, and collaboration across systems. They have ideas for improvement and innovation they believe could result in positive change at both the individual and system levels.

Still, there are no shortcuts to improved educational and employment outcomes for people with disabilities or to the systemic improvements that are needed at every level to facilitate them. Individuals and teams seeking to advance ideas for improvement and innovation will do so within systems where there are competing priorities, as well as issues related to time, resources, staffing, and any number and type of other constraints (Strauser, 2021). They will also likely encounter systems that are, by their nature, built to resist change. All of this is particularly true within government settings and other bureaucratic systems. However, while real and sustainable change will almost certainly be harder and take longer, the investment of time and effort will ultimately produce more than any presumed shortcut ever could.

Practitioners and researchers in the field of VR have been interpreting and evaluating the impact of Federal policy initiatives to promote educational and career opportunities for people with disabilities for more than 50 years. Working together with people with disabilities themselves and their families, employers, government officials, public school personnel, and policymakers, VR professionals have continually identified adolescence and young adulthood as a critically important developmental period for focused advocacy, service delivery, and research efforts (Strauser, 2021; Zunker, 2015). Savickas (2020) pointed to key early career experiences and activities as the rightful focus for young people with disabilities in the exploration and establishment phases of career development. These include introduction to professional mentors, apprenticeships, paid employment in their chosen fields of endeavor, supported and customized employment, paid internships, self-advocacy training related to workplace accommodations and Americans with Disabilities Act implementation, postsecondary education with appropriate supports, job search skills training, job shadowing, and informational interviewing (Rumrill and Wickert, 2021; Wehman, 2013).

With the documented importance of career exploration and establishment activities in mind, the purpose of this special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* (JVR) is to highlight current scholarship regarding transition and individual supports in education and employment for youth and young adults with disabilities. Each article that is featured in this issue, through the findings it presents and the implications it raises, helps to inform this important and ongoing conversation about how best to prepare young people with disabilities for the adult world. Rifenbark et al. (2023) report on the construction of a measurement model of self-reported perceptions of school climate and extant high school academic and behavioral data for adolescents with and without disabilities. Rumrill et al. (2023) review existing literature regarding transition and employment for youth with autism spectrum disorder. Leslie et al. (2023) present findings on the workplace discrimination experiences of Americans with learning disabilities. Bond et al. (2023) analyze the empirical literature on individual placement and support services, assessing evidence of differences in access, retention, and outcomes for Black and Hispanic clients relative to non-Hispanic White clients. Strauser et al. (2023) outline the barriers to employment for young adults who are survivors of central nervous system cancerous tumors. Genova et al. (2023) evaluate the psychometric properties of adapted self-report measures assessing job interview skills and job interview anxiety. Kulzer et al. (2023) describe the Cognitive Skills Enhancement Program, a comprehensive clinical program designed for young adults with neurodevelopmental and cognitive disabilities transitioning to postsecondary education. Li et al. (2023) examine the effect of college or university training on employment outcomes in a sample of young adults with specific learning disabilities who were served by state VR agencies. Lambert et al. (2023) report on information gathered on the implementation of Pre-employment Transition services at the local service delivery level in two states. Sherwood et al. (2023) present an initial implementation and evaluation of a clinical trial where teachers were trained to deliver Virtual Interview Training for Transition-Age Youth within five pre-employment transition services programs.

Taken in aggregate, these articles have been carefully selected to represent the breadth and depth of current scholarship related to transition and individual supports. I know it is the hope of the guest co-editors Dr. Phillip Rumrill, Dr. Connie Sung, and

Dr. Jian Li, and the hope of Dr. Paul Wehman, JVR's Founding Editor, that JVR readers will find these pieces interesting, methodologically rigorous, and reflective of some of the key issues facing the growing population of people with disabilities who are in need of transition and individual support services to prepare them for future success in the competitive, integrated labor market.

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