State Vocational Rehabilitation Leaders' Perspectives on Partnering with Higher Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability

By Jaclyn Camden, Hannah Ramsey, and Dana Yarbrough

Introduction

Nationally, the employment rate of people with intellectual disability is only around 19%. In comparison, the employment rate for people without disabilities is 63% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Higher education is a pathway to employment that can be supported by vocational rehabilitation (VR; Cimera et al., 2018). Inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) is a field of study focused on developing, expanding, and improving higher education options for students with intellectual disability, who are enrolling in a college or university with peers with or without disabilities in pursuit of a career. VR and higher education programs for individuals with intellectual disability have similar goals: increased preparation for and increased access to paid employment for people with disabilities. Grigal et al. (2023) reported during 2021–2022, almost 60% of all students who completed a Transition and Postsecondary Program for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID) program were working at or within 90 days of graduation. This fact highlights how higher education programs for students with intellectual disability have the potential to help close the employment gap for these students.

State VR agencies are critical partners to higher education programs, as they support paid employment opportunities for people with intellectual disability. Programs report some VR agencies have partnered with them by providing financial assistance and job coaches and leveraging their business networks to help students access employment opportunities (Grigal & Whaley, 2016). Programs also report the level of VR support differs from state to state and even program to program (Lee et al., 2018).

To better understand the successes, needs, and barriers VR agencies experience related to partnering with higher education programs for students with intellectual disability, the Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network Employment Partnerships Workgroup held a listening session with seven VR state leaders. These leaders represented diverse geographic locations, sizes, demographics, and types of partnerships with their state's higher education programs for students with intellectual disability.

In this brief, we describe the listening session and provide a summary of the findings from the discussion, along with recommendations for improving practice. The information gleaned from the listening session acts as a catalyst for facilitating stronger partnerships between state VR agencies and higher education programs to increase access to and opportunities for paid employment for people with intellectual disability. The information gathered during the listening session guides the Workgroup's future efforts in developing resources and training highlighting successful partnerships and addressing barriers.

Listening Session

Format and Participants

The Workgroup held the February 2023 listening session virtually for over 90 minutes. We invited VR representatives to participate from five states who were directors, transition and policy administrators, and program managers working directly with higher education programs for students with intellectual disability. The seven representatives who attended held the following positions:

Region	Role of state-level representative(s)
Northeast	• VR Program Manager • Transition Program Manager
West	• Manager of Policy, Planning, & Continuous Improvement • Supported Employment Program Manager
Southeast	• Director of Policy and Compliance • Transition Program Administrator
Southwest	• Executive Director

The VR representatives answered five questions about their state's experience partnering with higher education programs for students with intellectual disability. The questions covered the status of their partnership with their state's programs, barriers and challenges to collaboration, and positive outcomes of the collaborative effort between their agency and the programs. We used the following questions to guide the discussion:

Questions/prompts for the listening session:

1. Give the group a snapshot of the current highlights or status of your state's higher education programs for students with intellectual disability.

2. What are the barriers hindering, or that have hindered, your VR agency's partnership with higher education programs that need to be addressed? How might these barriers be addressed?

3. What positive outcomes or relationships have been built with higher education programs for students with intellectual disability in your state that have led to paid employment for students?

4. Is there any information that you believe is critical to this discussion that has yet to be shared?

5. Are there any final thoughts you would like to share before we close this session?

Analysis

After the session, the Workgroup facilitators completed a thematic analysis of the listening session transcript. The analysis revealed four key points around essential components of collaborative partnerships between VR and higher education programs for students with intellectual disability. The following content comes directly from the listening session. However, the facilitators anonymized the findings due to the desire for the VR representatives to speak candidly during the listening session.

Findings

Four key points emerged from the listening session. In the following sections, we summarize each key point and related issues, and provide recommendations for improving practice.

> ## KEY POINT 1: Communicate Accurately and Often
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> The VR representatives acknowledged communication is one of the most critical components of building strong relationships between VR agencies and higher education programs for students with intellectual disability. One VR representative stated, *"Intentional communication was what got the partnership going and kept it moving forward."* Another VR representative cautioned that education language and VR language are different, and both entities must establish a common ground for communication. As the listening session unfolded, many of the suggested barriers and effective strategies highlighted the need for strong and frequent communication. The importance of communication cannot be overstated when establishing a strong working relationship between VR and programs.

Issues:

The following issues illustrated the importance of frequent, timely, and accurate communication:

1. **Lack of accurate communication within and between VR entities and with higher education programs creates challenges.**

   a. Communication between entities in the VR system: Participants emphasized communication can break down at all levels, including within VR administration, between the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) and state agencies, and state/local VR offices. Correct policy interpretation and expectations may not be communicated consistently or accurately at varying levels. Inconsistent communication or, at times, miscommunication leads to staff confusion and a lack of access for students looking for VR support to attend higher education programs.

   Communication within VR system: Lack of clarity about the level of support from a VR agency for a program arises when there is a lack of internal VR communication, especially when VR administrators fail to convey their endorsement of the partnership to the counselors responsible for working with program staff, potential students, and enrolled students. This lack of clear communication can cause counselors to inadequately support a student's access to a higher education program.

   b. Communication with higher education: Inconsistent, and sometimes inaccurate, messaging can be conveyed from VR counselors to higher education program staff regarding the potential availability of support from VR.

2. **Each field uses different terminology and language.** Miscommunication can occur when entities assume language and terminology have the same meaning across agencies and institutions. For example, *student* is defined differently across systems and policies, and how the fields of IPSE and VR define *internships* can differ. Also, VR counselors may not be familiar with academic acronyms or language. The VR representatives expressed one of the first steps in facilitating good communication is for program staff to use VR language and understand VR terminology.

3. **There is an absence of consistent and timely communication between VR counselors and program staff.** Along with establishing commonality in language, VR representatives stated it is essential to be intentional with communication. VR staff expressed higher education program staff did not always communicate frequently enough with VR counselors regarding updates, changes, celebrations, and plans.

Recommendations for Higher Education Programs:

- Communicate with VR at several essential touchpoints to support a strong partnership. Those touchpoints include:
  - » **before the student is accepted into the program.** VR counselors want to be informed about the student's intent to enroll in a higher education program rather than being surprised to hear that students have applied and been accepted into the program.
  - » **before the implementation of any significant changes for the student.** This could be changes in career goals or semester plans. While the established Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) between VR and the student can be adjusted, there must be a conversation and agreement before those plans change. Lack of communication about these changes could result in loss of support from VR.
  - » **when accomplishments and celebrations occur.** VR counselors encouraged higher education programs to reach out and share good news, not only when there are issues.
  - » **at the end of the semester and before the next one begins.** This allows VR counselors to be part of discussions about the following semester's plans.
- Learn and use 'VR language' and seek to understand their terminology, including their services and support structure.

Recommendations for VR:

- Become familiar with IPSE and higher education terminology and understand where it differs from VR terminology.

Recommendations for Both Higher Education Programs and VR:

- Establish a contract to ensure all parties understand each entity's expected touchpoints and responsibilities.
- Develop clear and agreed-upon definitions for terms across entities.

> ## KEY POINT 2: Increase Understanding of Respective Systems Practices and Associated Federal and State Guidance
>
> A key point made during the listening session was the need to 1) increase state VR agency and higher education program personnel's knowledge of each other's system and practices and 2) understand the federal and state guidance impacting system-level collaboration.

Issues:

The following issues illustrated the importance of education and understanding:

1. **VR counselors and administrators lack knowledge of higher education programs for students with intellectual disability within their state and nationally.** Throughout the listening session, VR representatives noted not all counselors or administrators are familiar with these programs. If state and local agencies do not know these programs exist, how can VR counselors be expected to partner with programs and support students? VR representatives also acknowledged guidance from administrators does not always make its way to individual counselors and some VR counselors are unaware VR can provide financial support for a student to complete a higher education program as part of their IPE. The group recognized internal training within VR offices regarding IPSE and the associated policies and funding as crucial to an effective partnership. Program staff should assist in facilitating these discussions and supporting counselors in navigating the partnership. Staff turnover emphasizes the need for continuous and intentional education.

2. **Program staff, educators, students, and families lack knowledge of VR.** Higher education program staff may also lack knowledge of the VR counselor role and the services and support they can provide to a student with intellectual disability going to college. VR representatives reported frustration when program staff come to the table with little awareness of the agency. At the same time, VR representatives shared that VR is still an unknown agency to many students with intellectual disability who might be interested in higher education. Continuous education about VR is needed due to higher education program and VR staff turnover, changes in the program and field, and a constant stream of new students.

3. **Program and VR staff have inconsistent understanding of federal and state guidance and policies impacting collaboration and support.** The examples provided in the listening session illustrated the inconsistent implementation of key policies that assist students with intellectual disability in preparing for and accessing higher education. These policies included the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the Higher Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA). While there has been guidance, such as the 2018 statement from the Inclusive Higher Education Committee, *Addressing the Policy Tangle* (Lee et al., 2018), on how each works together to provide opportunities, there is still a discrepancy in interpretation and understanding.

4. **Staff have inconsistent understanding of whether VR can support access to a non-degree credential program.** Several representatives mentioned earning a non-degree credential or certificate and not a degree from a higher education program hindered VR support. Participants gave examples of state-level administrators who were skeptical of starting the conversation around supporting higher education programs for students with intellectual disability due to the students earning a certificate. Some counselors believe VR can only support students if they obtain a degree at the end of their higher education program. One VR representative expressed students receiving a certificate was an issue for VR Federal Indicators. However, they acknowledged that, even so, these programs are still helpful as they support students to gain

skills and training in a particular field. Higher education programs that only offer certificates of completion and not industry-specific credentials do not currently count under the new WIOA Performance indicator for Credential Attainment. However, the benefit and impact of these programs can meet and exceed the other indicators, including employment and measurable skills gain. VR representatives emphasized that despite the expressed concerns surrounding degree versus certificate obtainment, VR has systems to support students in degree-seeking programs regardless of financial hardship. Consequently, college students enrolled in certificate-seeking programs should receive comparable treatment.

5. **Staff have low expectations and understanding of students with intellectual disability attending higher education.** Research and experience show students with intellectual disability can attend higher education and succeed. Despite this evidence, some VR representatives acknowledged a need for a shift in mindset. Specifically, they emphasized the importance of VR administrators and counselors raising expectations and challenging preconceived notions that higher education is not an achievable option for students with intellectual disability. A VR representative highlighted the necessity to question existing assumptions about an individual's capabilities and capacities. However, transforming an agency's deeply ingrained culture of assumptions can be challenging. These prevailing assumptions often result in inadequate preparation for higher education and limited access to critical Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), such as those related to postsecondary education and training. While higher education may not be suitable for everyone, it is vital VR counselors consider all potential pathways to competitive integrated employment, including higher education, for everyone they serve, including people with intellectual disability. Low expectations and a lack of understanding of what students with intellectual disability gain from higher education can lead to inadequate counseling, planning, and service implementation.

> ### *Recommendations for Higher Education Programs:*
> - Provide comprehensive information about IPSE in general, program offerings, and the ideal student candidate, when approaching VR staff.
> - Highlight examples of successes and provide data on outcomes, experiences, and skill gains to VR counselors and administrators.
> - Use information from the [“Think Higher. Think College” public awareness campaign](#) to educate VR about the value of IPSE.
> - Share information about the importance of non-degree credentials in the labor market.
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> ### *Recommendations for VR:*
> - Create internal VR agency training on policies and guidelines that impact and support higher education access for students with intellectual disability. Identify internal VR staff and higher education program staff to assist counselors in learning procedures and policies related to their partnerships.
> - Provide students with intellectual disability access to postsecondary education and training and Pre-ETS.
> - Review current federal and state guidance on how existing regulations impact VR's support of higher education programs for students with intellectual disability. Ensure state and local policies are consistent with this guidance.
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> ### *Recommendations for Both Higher Education Programs and VR:*
> - Challenge the preconceived assumptions asserting that youth with intellectual disability cannot succeed in higher education and utilize higher education as a pathway to competitive integrated employment.

KEY POINT 3: Find Creative Solutions to Funding and Cross-System Partnerships

A vital component of sustainability for higher education programs for students with intellectual disability is the identification of funding streams to pay for program staff and services. The listening session highlighted VR agencies cannot be the sole financial providers either to sustain programs or for a student to pay tuition and fees. VR representatives emphasized the importance of having ongoing discussions with partners about creative solutions to funding.

Issues:

The following issues illustrated two main challenges regarding creative funding and partnerships:

1. **VR agencies are unable to cover the total costs of programs throughout their state.** Each representative in the listening session expressed a significant barrier to collaborative efforts is VR agencies' inability to fully cover program costs. However, all the agencies represented provided some financial assistance to support students with intellectual disability to attend higher education, for example, paying for internship stipends up to 15 hours a week, paying program fees, and/or covering portions of tuition and fees.

2. **There is a need for cross-system collaboration between agencies for braided or blended funding to support access to and employment within programs.** Regarding financial sustainability and student access to and support in paid employment, VR agencies cannot be a program's only funding source. Some VR representatives concluded it is the responsibility of the program staff to bring together other partners to discuss financial support and options. Interagency collaborative planning should occur to discuss creative funding and partnership solutions for the program's long-term sustainability. One VR staff shared the first meeting with VR offices should not be focused on how the agency can fund the program as it will limit potential collaboration.

Recommendations for Higher Education Programs:
- Discuss braided or blended funding options by working closely with the state Developmental Disabilities Agency, Developmental Disabilities Council, and Department of Education about funding and scholarship ideas.
- Bring all state collaborative employment partners to the table early and often to discuss cross-system funding and support.

Recommendations for VR:
- Participate in efforts to discuss cross-system funding and support.

Recommendations for Both Higher Education Programs and VR:
- Collaborate to develop a comprehensive statewide plan for supporting students attending higher education programs, involving multiple state partners.
- Advocate for policy change and increased allocation of state and agency funds diverted to supporting higher education access.

KEY POINT 4: Focus Partnerships on Supporting Employment Outcomes

The goal of VR is to support people with disabilities to enter or return to work (Rehabilitation Services Administration, nd). As such, VR is an employment-oriented service. Higher education programs can be categorized as employment services/programs only when they prepare individuals for a seamless transition into competitive integrated employment. Forming a partnership becomes a logical choice when the goals of VR and higher education programs for students with intellectual disability are aligned.

Issues:

The listening session presented four issues regarding employment-focused programming:

1. **Not all programs are focused on employment or have clear employment experiences and outcomes.** VR representatives stated they cannot support programs that do not have an employment component or strong competitive integrated employment outcomes. VR representatives expressed students graduating from higher education programs in their states should be obtaining employment within their chosen fields after graduation, but they have not always observed this to be the outcome.

2. **There is a lack of alignment between interests and experiences within higher education programs and with established VR plans.** VR representatives reported barriers to collaboration happen when the goals and plans of VR and higher education programs do not align. This misalignment can occur when programs are not employment-focused or supporting students in working toward their established career goals. They emphasized the need for program accountability to ensure employment experiences align with strengths and interests. The academic experiences should also align with agreed-upon goals. One representative shared it is challenging to support programs when students report enrolling in classes that do not align with their career goals.

3. **Challenges arise when program staff make changes to well-established career plans or VR plans.** VR representatives expressed that it can be frustrating to VR counselors when the higher education program diverts from the student's original employment plan when so much time and effort has been put into working with the student only to then place the student in a job, internship, or other work experience that does not advance skills or align with their career goal. Some representatives acknowledged it is becoming more commonplace for younger employees to change goals and switch careers. Some VR agencies are not aligning with the new workforce's career development and pathways. They are slow to react and adapt to the new labor market and workforce, especially around the gig economy and new ways of being employed and earning money. Still, programs must align with the established goals until all parties (the student, VR counselor, program staff) can discuss and agree upon changes.

4. **Programs are not adequately disseminating program and national employment outcomes.** One agency administrator shared the deciding factor for their support was that the programs in their state and nationwide were showing employment success after graduation way above the national average, as shown in the recent TPSID annual report (Grigal et al., 2023). VR personnel need to see the employment benefits of attending higher education; however, this information is not being shared consistently. VR counselors will not support programs lacking strong employment outcomes. Higher education programs should ensure their career activities, paid employment experiences, and program employment outcomes are well-documented and shared frequently with VR agencies.

Recommendations for Higher Education Programs:

- Ensure students in the program have individualized, interest-driven employment opportunities.
- Document employment-related strategies used and outcomes within the program, particularly those aligned with VR initiatives and goals.
- Share data on employment outcomes with VR agencies..

Recommendations for VR:

- Investigate the employment benefits of students with intellectual disability attending higher education and understand the research and outcomes of programs both within the state and nationally.

Final Reflection

The current status of VR partnerships with higher education programs for students with intellectual disability differs in every state in the country and sometimes, differs within states as well. To expand higher education access and improve employment outcomes for students with intellectual disability, VR personnel must be at the table. Higher education program staff must continue to reach out and work to establish these partnerships. Building sustainable partnerships with VR personnel takes open communication that begins with common language, educating VR on IPSE, finding creative funding solutions, raising expectations that students with intellectual disability can thrive in higher education, and developing programs focused on strength and interest-based employment experiences. The Workgroup plans to use the information gathered through this listening session to develop more robust resources and training for VR agencies and higher education program staff to facilitate stronger state-level collaboration.

For more information and resources on how higher education programs and VR agencies can partner, visit thinkcollege.net

SUMMARY: Invest in Building Strong Partnerships

The listening session highlighted the investment needed to form partnerships between VR agencies and higher education programs for students with intellectual disability, as well as the value of these partnerships. The VR representatives reported building strong partnerships takes time, effort, and resources. Importantly, VR representatives emphasized they want these programs to recognize they are more than just a funding source. The partnership can and should take a variety of forms. For example, VR agencies can provide career counseling, business connections, labor market information, and assistive technology consultation to programs. It is essential to leave an open door for collaboration in various ways and not limit the partnerships to just a funding stream.

There are reciprocal benefits to a partnership between VR and higher education programs for students with intellectual disability. One VR representative shared these programs are a bridge for them to connect with individuals they did not catch before they left high school. It is important for both entities to take the time to get to know each other and build common ground. Conversations can be centered around each entity's commitment to serving the student and how a partnership can serve students with disabilities. Investing in a positive and robust partnership means students gain access to higher education as a pathway to competitive integrated employment. VR agencies and higher education programs both want the students they support to achieve employment outcomes and are wise to invest in helping each other reach that goal.

VR Recommendations for Higher Education Programs:

For higher education programs specifically, the listening session led to the following additional recommendations for building a strong partnership with VR:

- Get everyone committed to serving the student. Keep the students and their outcomes central to the partnership. Higher education programs often need to be the ones to start the conversation.
- Prioritize interagency collaboration. Do not limit the partnership to just the higher education program and VR but help bring others to the table (e.g., Developmental Disabilities Agencies, State Departments of Education, and employment organizations).
- Reach out to others who have done it well. Connect the state's VR agency with other state VR agencies where there is a well-established relationship between the VR agency and higher education programs in the state.
- Involve VR counselors in sharing information with prospective students and recruiting for the program.
- Establish regular times for VR counselors to engage with the program (e.g., semester meetings, annual program meetings, or pre-semester planning).
- When connecting with VR agencies, identify someone already connected with the higher education program or its work who might be a champion and have them bring multiple representatives to the table, especially decision-makers.

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The Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network's (**thinkcollege. net/projects/tcn**) Employment Partnerships Workgroup was convened to address barriers and promote effective collaboration between higher education programs for students with intellectual disability and employment partners. The workgroup examines and addresses the collaborative efforts between vocational rehabilitation (VR) and higher education to address policy and practice facilitators and barriers to building stronger pathways to paid employment for college students with intellectual disability.

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) facilitates the workgroup, which is composed of employers, VR staff, higher education program staff, higher education students and graduates, and other organizations. The workgroup has been meeting since the beginning of 2022 to discuss how systems like VR, Developmental Disabilities agencies, and the workforce can collaborate with higher education programs to increase paid employment opportunities for college students with intellectual disability while enrolled and after graduation.

For further practice and policy recommendations from the listening session, see **Insight Brief 58: Listening to Vocational Rehabilitation Leaders: Practice and Policy Recommendations for Higher Education/Vocational Rehabilitation Partnerships**

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