Employment Preparation of Students with Intellectual Disability in Federally-Funded Higher Education Programs

By Daria Domin, Kelly Haines, and Allison Taylor

Employment has grown as a key outcome area for many postsecondary education programs (PSE) and particularly for Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSIDs) (Thoma, 2013). In addition to academic programming, TPSIDs have a directive to ensure that enrolled students with intellectual disability (ID) are prepared for gainful employment (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Most PSE programs serving students with intellectual disability have a career development component (Smith, Grigal, & Papay, 2018).

One study found students with ID who obtained a paid job while enrolled in a college or university program were almost 15 times more likely to have a paid job at exit than those who did not obtain a paid job while enrolled (Grigal, Papay, Smith, Hart, & Verbeck, 2018). Given the importance of including employment in postsecondary experiences, the National Coordinating Center used a qualitative approach to better understand the perspectives of employment services staff who provide career and job supports to students with ID in inclusive higher education programs.

METHOD

We conducted a series of focus groups with fourteen TPSID employment staff to explore their perspectives on providing employment services and supports to students with ID. To identify focus group participants, first, the research team created a list of TPSIDs with a higher percentage of students with paid jobs 90 days after exiting the program. Then, our team sought program staff who were most knowledgeable about employment practices of the respective TPSIDs and invited them to participate in the study. These individuals represented programs that varied in terms of institution type, location, and program size, and were distributed geographically across the United States. The study addressed the following questions:

- What are key strategies used in TPSID programs to promote paid employment?
- How do TPSID employment staff view the relationship between unpaid work experiences in college and paid employment after college?
- What are common challenges and opportunities with respect to employment approaches among TPSIDs?

All of the focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. Then the research team analyzed the data using thematic analysis by identifying and applying codes, writing memos, and drawing connections. From these processes, five major themes emerged:

1. goals and expectations
2. institutional contexts
3. external entities
4. structure and sequence
5. unpaid vs. paid employment

KEY FINDINGS

GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS FOR EMPLOYMENT

There was consensus among employment staff from TPSIDs that students with ID should have experiences in college and expectations for employment that mirror their peers without ID, and that college is a critical part of the path toward adulthood.

> *"I think we've set up our program to help the students explore the possibilities that are out there, and not just entry–level burger–flipping kind of thing, but something that they really want to do. And then we prepare them to be competitive when they're applying for that job."*

Participants consistently expressed that students should have the opportunity for fulfilling careers, but staff had different perspectives and approaches

about how to prepare students for those careers during college. Whereas there was general agreement about long-term goals for students, program staff differed in their expectations for employment during college. Some expected students to engage in paid or unpaid work while enrolled at the college, considering this a critical step towards developing careers. Others focused more on career preparation. In addition to expectations for employment, the programs also played a role in raising expectations for students with ID held parents, college staff, and potential employers.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS

Participants reported the employment and career development opportunities for students with ID were impacted by the TPSID program's relationship with its host institution. Opportunities were also impacted by the program's access to campus career centers, departmental employment opportunities like internships, or connections to service learning opportunities through coursework. Some TPSIDs were successful in creating partnerships with career centers and able to facilitate students' use of career services, such as career fairs, workshops, mock interviews, and internship and job databases by ensuring these opportunities were accessible to students with ID. There was an emphasis in the focus groups on facilitating access to existing resources on campus offered to all students rather than "building a whole separate silo" for TPSID students.

"We partner with our university's Career and Talent Development office, and they provide a variety of career workshops and events across the university that's open to all university students … So that's been very helpful, having both the partnership with Career and Talent Development…"

EXTERNAL ENTITIES

TPSID employment staff and students worked with external entities, including employers and employment service providers, to obtain paid employment for students. Relationships with external entities varied by TPSID. Some TPSIDs helped students engage with state agencies (e.g., Vocational Rehabilitation or state Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities agencies) or other employment service providers in the community, others provided referrals to these entities. At some TPSIDs there was an intentional or structured partnership between the TPSID program and an outside agency.

Working directly with employers was discussed among focus group participants, but there was little consensus across staff about how to best approach building business relationships, and participants offered few strategies for engaging businesses. Overall, participants suggested students had access to a wide range of employers both on-campus and in the community.

"I would also say it's one of the biggest challenges … It takes a lot of time with building those relationships and then explaining what our office does, giving a little bit more background on our students and explaining how we want to support the student and the employer through this experience. We want it to be beneficial for everyone."

STRUCTURE AND SEQUENCE OF EMPLOYMENT-RELATED EXPERIENCES

When describing the structure and sequence of employment-related experiences, it appeared no two programs were alike. The TPSID staff described a range of career development and employment activities, including both paid and unpaid work-related experiences. At some TPSIDs, there were sequences of work experiences (moving from unpaid to paid), while at other TPSIDs employment staff pursued what was available on campus and places in which they had connections.

"We will escalate from starting with an on–campus internship to an off–campus internship, hopefully moving in a path towards a career.[...] So, we try to have multiple internship experiences over the period of four years starting in year two, and hopefully there's a continuum there, starting on–campus to off–campus, working towards where the employment ends up being in the end."

UNPAID VS. PAID EMPLOYMENT

Our findings reflect the focus and expertise of the employment staff at TPSIDs was more on unpaid work experiences rather than paid employment experiences. TPSID employment staff indicated paid employment was a long-term goal, but it was not prioritized while students were enrolled. Staff indicated many students did not have much work or volunteer experience prior to entering the TPSID program, and beginning with unpaid employment experiences were a reasonable option. Some staff indicated the TPSID program avoided unpaid work, while others saw value in unpaid work experiences, observing that these experiences helped students refine their interests and future career goals.

CONCLUSION

Participants agreed students with ID should have experiences in college and expectations for employment that mirror their peers without ID, yet there was variability in the emphasis on paid employment during college, and no single approach was used to provide career development, work-based learning, or employment supports. TPSID programs varied widely with regard to the institutional contexts, external entities, structure and sequences of employment related activities, and use of unpaid versus paid employment experiences.

While it is encouraging that TPSID staff are focused on supporting students in pursuing employment, there may be a benefit to having a more consistent approach to career preparation and employment across programs. To improve future employment services, PSE programs could consider some of the strategies shared by focus group participants, such as improving access to career services, building strong business relationships, and supporting students to pursue an array of paid and limited unpaid work experiences that build toward a career.

This fast fact provides a brief overview of the study and highlights key findings and implications for policy and practice. Read more in the full article:

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