## The Importance of Collaborating on Concurrent Work and Education Opportunities: Kentucky Experiences

*By Kathy Sheppard-Jones, Victoria Reilly, and Melissa Jones*

Exclusion and segregation have fed a cycle of low expectations and curtailed opportunities across all life domains for people with intellectual disabilities (ID). By coordinating supports and services across agencies and disciplines, however, individuals with ID are now being afforded opportunities rarely provided in the past, increasing their meaningful inclusion in work, education, and society in general.

In Kentucky, ongoing research on life outcomes for people receiving state-funded developmental disability supports indicate poor outcomes related to employment, relationships, recreational opportunities, and even health and exercise. Kentuckians with ID are also lonely, with 73% feeling lonely sometimes or often, compared to 29% of the Kentucky general population (Kentucky National Core Indicators, 2010). However, powerful findings of this research also show that people with disabilities who are employed in the community via competitive or supported employment experience far better outcomes than their non-employed counterparts, including improved outcomes in key areas of quality of life, including health and relationship indicators (Kentucky National Core Indicators, 2010).

We know that participation in higher education, like participation in the workforce, brings increased opportunities. A college education is valued by our society and often results in economic advantages for those who participate. Research is beginning to show that this is also the case for students with ID. Recent the Services Administration (RSA) data showed that students with any kind of disability enrolled in institutions of higher education (IHEs) exited VR programs with jobs at a rate 26% higher

than those not engaged in higher education, and the income earned by these students was 73% higher than for VR consumers who were employed but had not attended college (Migliore & Butterworth, 2009).

This Brief describes how Kentucky postsecondary programs are working with vocational rehabilitation (VR) to provide employment opportunities to students with ID who are participating in postsecondary programs. The partnership between state VR and IHEs is considered crucial to enhancing life opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities in Kentucky.

## A TIME FOR CHANGE

The 2008 reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (P.L. 110-315) (HEOA) provides stronger incentives for building stronger partnerships among agencies that serve students with disabilities and Kentucky colleges; the act opened the door for consumers of the VR system with ID to seek ways of attaining vocational goals that include higher education.

The subsequent Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) grant competition, through the Office of Postsecondary Education, funded Kentucky's Supported Higher Education Project (SHEP) in 2010 for five years (2010-2015). Kentucky residents with ID who are motivated to go to college, who have appropriate family or other supports, and who have educational or employment goals requiring postsecondary education are eligible to participate. SHEP is currently serving 47 students with ID at three IHEs in Kentucky. It provides authentic person-centered planning, individualized supports

(e.g., assistance with planning and organizing; serving as liaison to college professors, administrators, and staff; technology assessments; tutoring; networking; social and recreational supports; development of natural supports), mentoring, and other supports as needed.

A key component of SHEP is a strong collaborative effort with Kentucky Office of VR (OVR) to explore ways to creatively provide supports to individuals with ID, ignoring traditional organizational purviews and domains. Typically in Kentucky, individuals who are served by VR are either pursuing education or taking part in job development/ job training activities. If a person attends college, that is the focus of their Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) and supports are developed for that one specific vocational goal. Once the person completes the education goal outlined in his/her IPE, the focus shifts to employment-related activities. It's a sequential process. In this pilot, however, students pursue education and job training concurrently, with an Educational Coach contracted to assist with both academic hurdles and work-related activities. The OVR has developed a service fee memorandum (SFM) for students with ID in higher education who are consumers of OVR and participating in the pilot. To use this SFM, vendors must be approved supported employment providers. All pilot participants must have an IPE in place.

The assistance provided is based on the needs and interests of the individual student while maintaining certain progression requirements established in their person-centered plan. Services must be planned with the student's VR counselor and documented hourly with specific service descriptions. Examples of services provided include:

- Contacting and meeting with the student, family members, OVR counselor, and classroom mentors to discuss work preferences, goals, and environments compatible with the individual's skills and abilities;
- Networking with university staff and Disability Services to identify employment opportunities on campus or near campus;
- Researching campus employment opportunities with

the student;

- Acquiring detailed job description, employment handbook, etc. to review with the student;
- Facilitating initial interview with employer as needed;
- Requesting on-site observation, performing and documenting a task analysis for each given duty;
- Identifying the student's scheduling needs and tools/accommodations (e.g. written schedule, graph calendar);
- Negotiating the student's work schedule and implementing tools/accommodations needed;
- Identifying direct supervisors and key staff working with the student;
- Identifying staff "mentors" and other natural supports to reinforce good work behaviors;
- Meeting with management, direct supervisors, and regular staff working with the student and conducting orientation on the following: individual work study goals for the student; work expectations for the student; importance of inclusion and maintaining a high standard of work expectation; background information on a student's disability, how it may manifest, what obstacles and/or opportunities it may present; and specific strategies for training and/or redirecting;
- Identifying appropriate training aids or accommodations (e.g., task lists, flash cards, color coding, etc.);
- Providing job support services on-site as negotiated with management;
- Negotiating specific supported employment services such as skills training, workplace supports, observation, and progress updates;
- Facilitating mentoring relationships between the student and other employees;
- Training mentors as needed;
- Establishing regular contact with management and/or mentors to identify additional training needs and goals;
- Providing ongoing support to mentors/staff, assisting in problem-solving when needed;
- Providing ongoing support to student and

management as requested; and

• Communicating regularly with OVR counselor, reporting progress.

Seven students are currently participating in this collaborative pilot. Adult supported employment vendors are trained as educational coaches to support the two directions of the IPE (i.e., postsecondary participation and employment), and as a result, the students are receiving supported employment services while enrolled in postsecondary education. A result of this meaningful collaboration is a streamlined process that addresses both the educational and vocational needs of individuals with ID.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS PROJECT

Though providing concurrent postsecondary and employment opportunities is relatively new territory, it is exciting to be a part of positive change. Through collaboration that includes common goals and shared resources, individuals with ID can have and are having enriching life experiences that will ultimately have a positive impact on their quality of life outcomes. Equally important is changing the perceptions and paradigms of IHEs, secondary schools, disability-related organizations (such as Medicaid waiver providers), and state VR agencies. This pilot enables us to highlight the competence and abilities of individuals with disabilities—a variety of systems and the people who work in them are being impacted by the inclusion of students with ID in college. A strong connection between students with ID and state VR agencies is critical to sustaining opportunities in higher education for this population. There is still much to be learned about effective partnerships for supporting individuals with disabilities, but we learn more with each endeavor. It is hoped that this pilot will yield results that will open the door to similar collaborative work around the country.

### Leading by Example: Meet Zach

Zach attends Northern Kentucky University (NKU). He is taking courses in math, English, and physical education. He receives OVR contracted support through a supported employment agency, The Point/ARC of Kentucky, also located in northern Kentucky. Both his VR and supported employment counselors attend his person-centered planning (PATH) meetings held at the university, collaboratively generating plans with Zach and his family as well as university personnel and mentors to address his personal, social, educational, and vocational goals. Through this collaborative process, Zach has acquired a seasonal job at the campus bookstore, where he stocks shelves for minimum wage. Job coaching on campus was provided initially through The Point, but has since faded to a consultation model with Zach's supervisor. The coach from The Point also facilitated Zach volunteering at the campus recreation center, where he keeps a regular schedule doing tasks that other university students perform as well.

Learning how best to support Zach has been an evolving process as collaborators moved past traditional transition approaches to work creatively with Zach to meet his needs and capitalize on his strengths. Initially, Zach's supported employment specialist at The Point attempted to conduct a vocational evaluation of Zach at various job sites off campus, but she struggled to find anything that Zach was interested in doing. Due to his lack of motivation during the evaluation, the supported employment provider thought he did not have the skills necessary to obtain and maintain a job. After the pilot project started, she decided to conduct the vocational evaluation on the NKU campus while he was volunteering at the student recreation center. There, she observed the variety of skills Zach actually had, which he willingly displayed when doing a job which interested him. Zach hopes to be employed in the field of mathematics when he finishes school. He states, *"I hope to get a pretty cool job and move on to it… I want to have a good career and be more independent when it's that time."*

Zach is just one example of how this collaborative project creates unprecedented opportunities for students. For VR, employment outcomes for students in this program are likely to be improved. Students will have stronger resumes when they complete their higher education and will have engaged in meaningful activities which enhanced their personal development, thus enhancing their employability. Moreover, the students supported by this project are individuals with the most significant disabilities or those with limitations in at least three major areas of functional capabilities. It is anticipated that future outcomes data will highlight the need for making this integrated form of support available to all postsecondary students with ID in Kentucky and beyond.

## REFERENCES

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