

Perspectives of Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors on the Career Planning Process for College Students with ASD

Elizabeth Evans Getzel, Christine Grauer, and Lori Briel

ABSTRACT

This article describes the results of structured interviews with 19 vocational rehabilitation counselors concerning their experiences working with college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Participants represented local Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) offices across the state of Virginia. Results describe counselors' perspectives on the career preparation needs of college students with ASD, provision of services and supports provided by VR for students with ASD, collaboration with campus services and supports, and the professional development needs of VR counselors to better serve college students with ASD.

The number of young adults with disabilities interested in pursuing postsecondary education opportunities for employment is increasing on vocational rehabilitation (VR) caseloads (Fleming & Fairweather, 2011). VR counselors play an important role in assisting young adults with disabilities in developing a career path into adulthood by providing a variety of career-related services including, but not limited to, vocational assessments, career counseling and exploration as well as situational assessment, job development, and job placement (Fleming & Fairweather, 2011). VR counselors are often integral members of transition planning teams working with students as they transition into employment or postsecondary education. Much has been written about such secondary transition teams and the critical components that assist students with disabilities in the transition process (e.g., Getzel & Wehman, 2005; Wehman, 2006; Wehmeyer & Webb, 2012). Yet, once students with disabilities enter college, there is limited research on the career related services and supports they receive (Getzel, 2008; Getzel & Wehman, 2005; Roessler, Hennessey, & Rumrill, 2007).

In the case of students with ASD entering college, there is an increasing awareness that these students need postsecondary education options to meet their career goals and attain further independence (Rubin, 2007). However, most students with ASD have limited exposure to work environments, work-related skills needed to interact with co-workers and supervisors, and general employment etiquette prior to entering college, and once in college, this limited exposure continues (Briel & Getzel, 2009; Geller & Greenberg, 2011; Wehman, Smith, & Schall, 2009; Wolf, Brown, & Bork, 2009). Further research is necessary to identify effective approaches to assist college students with ASD in obtaining both the academics and career-related experiences they need to successfully enter employment.

A study funded by the National Institute on Disability Rehabilitation Research was conducted to address this gap in the knowledge base about the services and support needs of college students with ASD, and the collaboration of campus services to meet these needs. This article describes the results of structured interviews with 19 VR counselors related to their experiences working with college students with ASD in their career planning and preparation.

METHOD

Participant Selection

Researchers used a purposive sampling procedure to select study participants (Morgan, 1998; Patton, 1990), to include VR counselors across Virginia who currently have or previously had college students with ASD on their caseloads. As a result of this statewide recruitment effort, 19 counselors were interviewed. Prior to conducting each interview, the researchers read a statement to obtain consent for the interview, followed by an explanation of the purpose of the interview and a definition of ASD.

Instrument

A series of eight questions was developed for the structured interviews. Initial questions sought information on the nature of participants' collaboration with campus disability support services and career center staff members. They were then asked to describe what they believed to be critical components for collaboration among vocational rehabilitation, disability support services and career centers.

Following questions on collaboration, VR counselors were asked about their level of knowledge of ASD, where they received their information about working with individuals with ASD, and potential areas of training or information still needed. Interview questions also focused on what information or training would be helpful when providing career services to college students with ASD. The remaining survey questions asked specific questions about participants' experiences working with college students with ASD; in particular:

- examples of the types of services provided and the level of involvement of the students receiving these services;
- perspectives on the major career challenges confronting these students; and
- services and supports both on and off campus needed to enable college students with ASD to

successfully earn a degree or certificate and enter employment.

Data Collection

Researchers created an informational email about the IRB approved study including their contact information and sent it to a contact person in the state rehabilitation office. The email was sent out to counselors across the state asking if they had worked with college students with ASD and were interested in completing a telephone interview. Information was also provided about how the interview data would be used; participation in the study was strictly voluntary, and no identifying information would be used when reporting the results. To ensure their anonymity, the counselors were instructed to contact researchers directly and not go through the contact at the state VR office. Once VR counselors contacted researchers, interviews were scheduled.

Data Analysis

Information obtained from the interview instrument was reviewed separately by the interviewer and two other members of the research team to identify emergent themes. The researchers then compiled their results, and recurring themes were identified. Participants did not express specific categories in their responses (Madaus, 2006; Patton, 1987). Descriptive statistics were used for analyzing all of the survey responses.

RESULTS

Nineteen VR counselors employed by the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services participated in the structured interviews. Four primary categories were identified by the research team, including provision of VR services to students with ASD, knowledge and training needs of VR counselors working with individuals with ASD, collaborating with campus service providers, and career support needs of students with ASD.

VR Service Provision to Students with ASD

Eighteen out of 19 VR counselors responded that they served students with ASD. When asked what types of services they provided, the most commonly reported services were guidance and counseling, supported employment, and diagnostic and vocational evaluation. Counselors also frequently reported providing or facilitating career development services such as career counseling and exploration, situational assessment, job development, and job placement.

The majority of VR counselors rated students' involvement with the VR office as highly involved or involved, although the level of involvement varied depending on the student. In some cases, VR counselors noted that parents, rather than students, maintained regular contact with them.

VR counselors reported several common concerns expressed by students with ASD regarding their careers. Issues frequently discussed by students with their VR counselors included:

- anxiety with interacting with peers or employers in school or work settings,
- fear or frustration with obtaining employment in their chosen field, and
- uncertainty over being able to achieve financial independence.

One counselor noted that students with ASD sometimes “have higher level goals and no path to get there, and are frustrated and bored with entry level jobs.”

ASD Knowledge and Training Needs

VR counselors reported obtaining much of their ASD knowledge through non-VR agency sponsored trainings such as on-line training and webinars, college or university coursework, and professional association programs. When VR counselors received most of their training through VR agency sponsored or affiliated trainings, these opportunities consisted of workshops, on-

the-job experiences, and consultation with other agency professionals.

Most VR counselors rated themselves as very knowledgeable or knowledgeable about ASD. Despite their level of knowledge, they expressed interest in a variety of information and training needs such as:

- learning strategies for preparing students with ASD for work,
- “best practices for assessing vocational potential,”
- opportunities to hear stories of successfully employed adults with ASD, and
- access to new research and data about ASD.

As one counselor stated, “I remain curious about research about what happens to adults with ASD. Are they tracked? What are the successful outcomes?” In addition, VR counselors acknowledged information and training needs in the areas of behavior modification and social skills training. Finally, the need for training on communication and learning strategies and assistive technology options that are effective with students with ASD was also noted by VR counselors, “I would like more information on what assistive technology may be useful and about the communication processes of students with ASD (both to understand their style as well as how best to communicate with them).”

Although VR counselors identified a variety of formats for receiving ASD information and training, they overwhelmingly expressed a preference for participating in face-to-face trainings. Web-based formats, such as webinars and e-newsletters were frequently mentioned as convenient and time efficient ways for counselors to access information; however, participants still believed face-to-face was the most effective method. Finally, written materials and resources were also identified as possible formats for staying informed about developments in the field.

Needs of Students with ASD

VR counselors described a wide range of challenges and needs that affect the educational and career development of students with ASD. Opportunities for career exploration, access to internships, and participation in community-based assessments and experiences were commonly identified as important to the career development and career preparation of these students. As one counselor stated, students with ASD “need more time to figure out what they want to do, need more visual, hands on things to do, community based assessments – so they can figure it out. Otherwise they cannot make that leap.”

VR counselors also reported that students with ASD often experience challenges with social norms and social interactions that impact their college experiences and relationships, ability to secure employment opportunities, and job retention once they become employed. Educating faculty, staff, employers, and coworkers about ASD was identified as a strategy for raising awareness and understanding of the social aspects of ASD. More emphasis on the development of soft skills was also recommended: “(When) preparing students for work, students focus on accommodations to graduate but they don’t focus on soft skills or work skills.”

An additional recurrent theme identified by VR counselors was that students with ASD need someone on campus to maintain contact with them and to monitor their academic performance and social adjustment. While VR counselors recognize the limitations of campus-based Disability Support Services (DSS) counselors in performing in this capacity, they maintain that students with ASD need a team to support them to be successful. Education coaches, case managers, and job coaches were identified as key personnel who may play a role in enabling students with ASD to complete their educational programs and to secure the services and supports necessary to enter the work force.

VR counselors also indicated that students with ASD need more preparation at the secondary education level. One counselor noted that “some students are very successful but supports in high school are so much different – students need to be better prepared for college and what to expect.” Counselors suggested that more high school-based career awareness programs be provided, so that students with ASD and their families can be educated as to what it takes to find and keep employment. VR counselors also identified additional service needs such as self-advocacy training, access to transportation or the ability to get a driver’s license, and assistance completing financial aid applications. Access to a case manager who works with students with ASD beginning in high school through college and during employment was identified as an ideal service that could address unmet needs that may be beyond the scope of other professionals’ job responsibilities. As stated by one counselor, “There is also a lack of long term case management. I have closed students two years ago but they still call... no one else to go to....”

Collaboration

VR counselors indicated that they often collaborated with campus Disability Support Service (DSS) staff to serve students with disabilities. This is done in a variety of ways, such as referring students and their family members to the DSS office, contacting DSS staff to inform them of students’ accommodation needs, troubleshooting with DSS staff when students encounter problems, and participating along with DSS staff on local transition teams. In some cases, VR counselors reported meeting with DSS staff and students to plan accommodations, and have provided DSS staff with copies of psychoeducational evaluations containing recommendations on accommodations. The majority of the contact that VR counselors have with DSS staff occurs when students first enroll in college; on-going contact between VR counselors and

DSS staff does not appear to be the norm unless the student is experiencing difficulty.

VR counselors reported little collaboration activity with campus Career Center counselors. As one VR counselor put it, “Right now there does not seem to be a strong connection between the Career Center and external agencies.” VR counselors reported that they do not regularly collaborate with Career Center counselors for a variety of reasons, including a lack of knowledge about what services Career Centers offer, whether Career Centers accommodate students with disabilities, and some students’ ability to find jobs independent of the Career Center. Despite the historical lack of collaboration between VR counselors and Career Center counselors, VR counselors indicated that they were receptive to learning more about Career Center services and to developing a collaborative relationship.

To facilitate collaboration between VR, DSS, and Career Center professionals, VR counselors emphasized that all team members in the collaboration relationship need to know the roles and services of each agency or program. Several strategies for imparting this knowledge were mentioned, such as participating in professional development opportunities, transition teams, and conferences; maintaining a resource list; holding regular meetings; and developing methods of communication. VR counselors widely agreed that VR agency policies do not inhibit collaboration, but frequently stressed that student consent is needed in order to share specific student information among parties.

DISCUSSION

The results of the structured interviews with VR counselors provide insights into the services and supports that are being provided by one State VR agency to students with ASD, their level of

knowledge of ASD, and their training needs regarding career planning for students with ASD. It should be noted that, because the focus of VR is on helping persons with disabilities become gainfully employed, VR counselors tended to respond to interview questions according to their experiences with students with ASD in postsecondary education as well as in the workplace.

These findings indicate that VR counselors provide or coordinate a variety of services for students with ASD who often need intensive services, such as supported education, case management, and supported employment in order to become successful in college and workplace settings. A theme that was frequently identified was the importance of providing community-based career exploration and assessments to help students with ASD to develop vocational goals and to assess whether a particular career choice is a good fit. VR counselors also emphasized the need for better student preparation at the secondary education level for the transition to postsecondary education, and increased campus support for students with ASD. Since the latter needs are not directly within the scope of VR roles and responsibilities, it seems evident that more efforts by VR counselors to influence and collaborate with secondary and postsecondary personnel on behalf of students with ASD may be warranted.

While the VR counselors interviewed reported themselves to be very knowledgeable to knowledgeable about ASD, they need more information and training on strategies for helping students with ASD with their social skills and behaviors, the use of effective communication and learning strategies, assistive technology, and preparing students with ASD for work. VR counselors also seek examples of persons with ASD who have graduated from college and are now successful in the workplace, which could yield useful information on the components that are involved with workplace success.

With regard to collaboration between VR counselors and postsecondary education DSS providers, a pathway for collaboration seems

to exist, due in large part to the shared focus of these entities on serving students with disabilities. However, collaboration between VR counselors and postsecondary Career Center counselors is much more rare, and the foundation for collaboration has yet to be established. It is apparent that Career Centers are a largely untapped resource that could be utilized to strengthen career development and workplace opportunities for students with ASD.

Implications for Practice

The results of the structured interviews represent the perspectives of 19 VR counselors in one state agency. Further research is needed to validate the results of our findings concerning the career planning and preparation needs of college students with ASD. Another potential limitation of the study is that some VR counselors responded to the questions based more on their experience with individuals with ASD seeking employment rather than in postsecondary education. As noted previously, since this is the focus of VR, it is recommended that in future studies, a larger sample of VR counselors is used, and participation in a study is more closely screened by their level of experience working directly with college students with ASD.

In spite of these limitations, the study's findings can be used to design further research in the areas of long term collaboration among service providers, broadening the collaboration of VR counselors with Career Centers, and increasing college students' knowledge of careers and the demands of the workplace through internships or other career-related experiences.

VR counselors expressed a need for a sustained team approach to assist college students with ASD to successfully complete their academics and move into employment. Colleges and universities are exploring new models of service delivery for students with and without disabilities to improve retention and persistence in

higher education (Getzel, 2008; Grigal & Hart, 2009; Wehmeyer & Webb, 2012). VR counselors need to be active members as new strategies and approaches (e.g., the use of education coaches, peer mentors) are implemented on college campuses for students with disabilities, and in particular, college students with ASD.

A critical component of creating strategies or models of support on campus is the collaboration among service providers assisting students with ASD. The results of this study indicate a need for more ongoing collaboration with DSS offices, and creating more opportunities for collaboration with campus Career Centers. These service providers, along with students with ASD and other identified members, could focus their efforts on expanding the internship or other career related activities for students with ASD. Developing a more comprehensive approach could assist students with ASD in their career choices. These students need opportunities to understand how their academic accommodations or supports transfer to the employment setting, and must learn how to interact with coworkers and to network with professionals in their fields to build successful experiences as they move from college into their careers. Collaboration can be helpful in supporting students with ASD in establishing their career objectives; understanding and identifying both community and campus resources that can assist them in college and after graduation; and assisting in identifying one or more work-related experiences prior to graduation, including mentorships, cooperative education placements, and internships.

Another pathway to enhance collaboration among campus based service providers and adult service agencies identified by VR counselors is engaging in mutual professional trainings or conferences. For example, inviting Career Center and Disability Support Services staff members to conduct presentations can assist VR

counselors and campus Career Center staff to better understand their areas of expertise that can enhance the career preparation of college students with ASD, and better utilize resources through collaboration.

This study involving VR counselors reinforces the importance of career growth, well-developed technical skills, and successful employment experiences

for college students with ASD. It is even more critical for college students with ASD to obtain these skills since these students often define themselves by their employment rather than their social network (Grandin & Duffy, 2004). Developing strategies for collaboration among VR counselors and campus service providers is an important step in assisting college students with ASD in their career planning and preparation process.

REFERENCES

- Briel, L.W., & Getzel, E.E. (2009). Postsecondary options for students with autism. In Wehman, P., Smith, M., & Schall, C. (Eds.), *Transitions for Youth with Autism* (pp. 189-208). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Fleming, A.R., & Fairweather, J.S. (2011). The role of postsecondary education in the path from high school to work for youth with disabilities. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 55*(2). Retrieved from <http://rcb.sagepub.com/content/55/2/71>
- Geller, L., & Greenberg, M. (2010). Managing the transition process from high school to college and beyond: Challenges for individuals, families and society. *Social Work in Mental Health, 8*(1), 92-116.
- Getzel, E.E. (2008). Addressing the persistence and retention of students with disabilities in higher education: Incorporating key strategies and supports on campus. *Exceptionality, 16*(4), 207-219.
- Getzel, E.E., & Wehman P. (2005). *Going to college: Expanding opportunities for individuals with disabilities*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Madaus, J.W. (2006). Improving the transition to career for college students with learning disabilities: Suggestions from graduates. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 19*(1), 85-93.
- Morgan, D.L. (1998). *Planning focus groups*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Patton, M.Q. (1987). *How to use qualitative methods in evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Roessler, R., Hennessey, M., & Rumrill, P. (2007). Strategies for improving career services for postsecondary students with disabilities: Results of a focus group study of key stakeholders. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals, 30*(3), 158-1.
- Rubin, B. (2007, August 23). Help for when college years are not so carefree. *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved August 24, 2007, from <http://www.chicagotribune.com>
- Wehman, P. (2006). *Life beyond the classroom: Transition strategies for young people with disabilities*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

- Wehman, P., Smith, M., & Schall, C. (2009). *Transitions for Youth with Autism*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Wehmeyer, M.L., & Webb, K. (2012). *Handbook of adolescent transition for youth with disabilities*. New York: Routledge.
- Wolf, L., Brown, T., & Bork, K. (2009). *Students with Asperger Syndrome: A guide for college personnel*. Shawnee Mission, KA: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.