



LEARNING LAB TOOLKIT FOR VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROFESSIONALS

Vocational Rehabilitation Youth Technical Assistance Center
Institute for Educational Leadership

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Part I. About the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Learning Lab Model

What Is It?

The VR Learning Lab Model was developed by Y-TAC to promote youth voice by conducting organized activities where young people and adults come together to ask questions to find potential solutions to the challenges of the adult and youth service delivery systems.

The **VR Learning Lab Model** provides an opportunity for participants of multiple disciplines to share experiential knowledge and innovative practices to engage opportunity youth with disabilities. The Learning Lab brings together young people and professionals, to develop a **commitment to change** the systems and programs in their home communities as well as strategies and techniques to serve young people to improve their employment outcomes. This model is designed to promote young people to highlight their experiences to further improve the delivery of services and employment outcomes.



VR Learning Lab Model

LINE OF INQUIRY

Examples of Questions Asked of VR Staff:

- How do we re-engage Out-of-School Youth (OSY) with disabilities?
- How do we increase employment and education outcomes for our population of young people?
- What are the most significant barriers to success that are experienced by our population of young people?
- How are the needs of young people with disabilities who are homeless different from other OSY with disabilities?
- What ONE systems change would you advise to make it easier for the VR and Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) professionals to assist in propelling more of our young people into postsecondary education and/or employment?

Commitment to Change

- What is your specific objective related to OSY youth with disabilities?
- What action steps will you take to accomplish the objective?
- For each action step consider:
 - Who needs to be involved?
 - What resources are needed?
 - What is the timeline/target completion dates for the action?

VR Learning Lab Model Framework

The Learning Lab Model is built upon the work of “community learning exchange” pedagogies (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016). The Learning Lab Model, similar to the “community learning exchange”, is a community-based framework led by essential partners involved in creating the transformational change. In this case, the Learning Lab Model involves youth with disabilities, VR Counselors/Administrators/Managers, youth serving organizations, community rehabilitation providers, educators, and workforce professionals.

The diverse needs of youth cannot be met by any one family, school, or program. The successful transition of all youth to adulthood and the world of work demands coordination and collaboration across the systems, agencies, and individuals who interact with each youth. Therefore, the Learning Lab Model requires the development of a “commitment-to-action” in their local communities (Guajardo et al., 2016). Essential partners are required to make a commitment-to-action to better serve opportunity youth with disabilities being served in the foster care system, juvenile justice system, and by organizations/agencies who are engaged with youth who have experienced homelessness.

The legislative mandate of WIOA has clearly prioritized transition services and funding for VR agencies to increase the postsecondary outcomes for young people with disabilities, including out-of-school youth with disabilities. The efficacy and success of WIOA and its programs is still pending, as it takes time to gather enough evidence to determine whether there is an increase of competitive integrated employment outcomes of youth with disabilities. It has been shown that programs that incorporate young people in an advisory role to develop systems have a higher rate of successful outcomes for those young people (Forenza & Happonen, 2016).

VR Learning Labs in Action

Y-TAC held a VR Learning Lab in California with nine states (VR agencies and partners) in May 2019 and another in Alaska with the VR agency and partners in September 2019. Both these VR Learning Labs focused on how to identify and engage/re-engage out-of-school (OSY) youth with disabilities. Youth with disabilities participated in Speak Out sharing sessions to inform youth service professionals that they are more apt to “buy in” to services, programs, and treatment, when they offered the opportunity to provide input and feedback and to develop the programs themselves.

What did California Participants Say About the Learning Lab?

- “Thank you so much for allowing me to be part of this experience.”
- “Thank you for centering on youth”
- “Loved all of it. Really liked the learning walk. Thank you for all the time and effort put into today. It was very helpful and activities and youth brought a lot of purpose to the day.”

Commitment to Change: California Learning Lab

There were three primary strategies or actions that participants planned to implement in their work with out-of-school youth: 1) involve youth in planning and implementation of programs; 2) collaborate more with other agencies who service OSY; and 3) implement specific activities discussed/presented in the workshop.

What did Alaska Participants Say About the Learning Lab?

- “The more I learn the easier my job gets.”
- “This session was so powerful, it made me see the different feel of working with the youth.”
- “Life changing. Thank you!”

Commitment to Change: Alaska Learning Lab

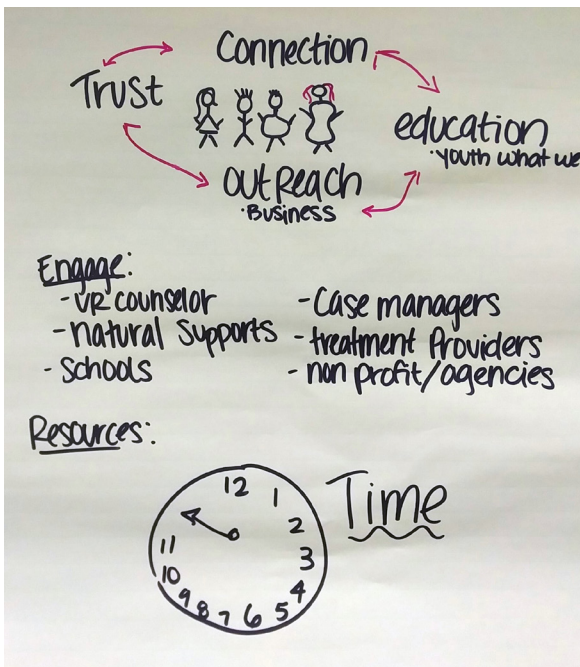
There were three categories of strategies or action plans that participants intend to implement in their work with OSY with disabilities: 1) implement new strategies to engage youth; 2) work with community partners and employers; and 3) develop specific programs.

Implications for the VR Field

Learning Labs offer an opportunity for VR agencies to:

- Ensure that youth with disabilities from multiple marginalized systems (e.g. foster care and/or juvenile justice systems) have a strong influence on the services that are delivered to them;
- Create an environment for youth with disability to have a voice and influence on systems change across all youth service delivery systems, including VR and workforce agencies;
- Become more reflective, thoughtful, and engaged partners in delivering services that support and include the youth voice within their own program development; and
- Provide high quality services that will enable youth gain and sustain employment.

The commitment-to-action is a collective action agreement among local partners that must include youth to create and develop a shared ownership of solutions to their specific issues. In other words, the power resides in the community to create local partnerships to solve tough issues while learning from other key partners and colleagues that not only include but emphasize the voice of the youth who will most benefit from those creative solutions.





Additional Resources

- Gracious space activities as an element of creating effective conditions for organizational change. <http://www.washington.edu/admin/hr/publications/email/pod/convio/leadingedge/au17/gracious-space.html>
- Poetry or other art forms that inspire and stimulate the creative side of the brain. iel.org/protocols
- Dynamic mindfulness. <https://www.niroga.org/training/dm/>

Contact

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Part II. VR Learning Lab Guide

Goals of a VR Learning Lab:

1. Move from youth participation as consumers or customers to authentic engagement as leaders of change and partners in program development.
2. Bring together individuals connected with Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies to actively learn about a chosen topic.

Involving youth as participants is paramount. In addition to youth, other participants may include the following:

- VR Counselors/Administrators/Managers
- Other agencies and organizations that serve youth
- Community Rehabilitation Providers
- Educators
- Workforce professionals
- Family members of youth
- Mentors

Participant Objectives:

- Discuss learning lab topic and best practices with a local organization.
- Practice trauma-informed methods of engagement.
- Note successes and opportunities for growth.
- Incorporate youth voice into program planning and decision-making.
- Develop a commitment-to-action (see attachment) in their local communities.

Review the comprehensive VR protocol document

- **Review the Trauma-Informed Methods of Engagement**
(See Recommended Reading in Part III)

Key Components/Steps to Initiate a Learning Lab:

- **Identify the needs of the VR agency and determine whether a Learning Lab is a good fit.**

If yes:

1. Determine what program or system requires improvement or development.

2. Determine your **line of inquiry**.
 - What questions will address the needs of the VR agency?
 - What questions will lead to solutions?
 3. Identify target youth population:
 - Youth with disabilities in the Foster Care system.
 - Youth with disabilities in the Juvenile Justice system.
 - Youth with disabilities who have experienced homelessness.
 - Youth with disabilities who are parents/pregnant.
 - Youth who are disengaged: not involved in school or work
 4. Determine who the participants will be
 5. Determine budget:
 - Budget Considerations:
 - Attendees: travel, meals
 - Facilitators: travel, meals, compensation
 - Site costs: venue, AV, supplies
 - Youth incentives
 - Other: accommodations, technology, sponsorship, registration fee
- **Network/connect with partner organizations that are doing exemplary work around this topic.**
 - Choose an organization that you have an established relationship.
 - Does the organization have the capacity to?
 - Accommodate a group of visitors?
 - Ensure its participants and staff are comfortable with a site-visit/off-site visit?
 - **Identify site-visit.**
 - Schedule site-visit
 - Either Learning Lab participants visit the site or the site comes to Learning Lab location.
 - What will take place during site-visit? This may include the following:
 - Tour
 - **Speak Out**
 - Lunch
 - **Learning Movement Activity**
 - **Gallery Walk**

- Who from the organization would be most effective in the planning and implementation?
 - Recruit youth (Ideal: 10 youth for audience of 20)
 - Organization staff
- Draft event agenda
- Ensure youth with various disabilities are included.
- Ensure that the youth do/did have prior experiences relevant to the target youth population.
- Ensure youth participants have had some exposure to VR.
- Determine the best number of youth for the venue.
- Determine youth incentive:
 - Allow for transportation costs, meals, compensation
- Schedule multiple prep meetings/calls to ensure youth know what to expect.
- Use Trauma Informed methods of engagement throughout all youth interactions.
- **Prepare Youth for Learning Lab:**
 - Ensure participants and facilitators are comfortable with the Learning Lab setting and expectations.
 - Discuss possible triggers associated with youth sharing their experiences.
 - Get youth input on how to best ameliorate/avoid triggers.
 - Schedule calls/video calls:
 - Define what a Learning Lab is
 - Share the event details
 - Explain why VR agency would like youth at the event
 - Define youth roles
 - Share youth incentive
 - Ask for feedback or questions/incorporate youth in the planning at all stages of the event
 - Coordinate follow-up phone calls
 - Learning Lab sponsor schedule in-person meetings with youth as far in advance as possible.
 - Enlist youth to draft Speak Out questions.
 - Have the youth develop first draft of questions prior to providing suggested questions.

- Review questions multiple times.
 - Allow youth to compose/write responses prior to event.
 - Allow for rehearsal of responses/role play.
- **Finalize event agenda. (See sample agenda)**
- **Day-of Tips for Conducting the Learning Lab**
 - Communicate throughout the event that youth are valued and equal partners in the learning experience
 - Share expectation from the beginning that attendees will make a commitment to act
 - Ensure youth are active participants throughout the event, not just for a specific activity
 - Review philosophy of Gracious Space
 - Discuss trauma-informed methods of engagement and how to apply them throughout the day
 - Allow flexibility in schedule in case some conversations require more time/ Don't disrupt the flow of a good exchange of ideas and experiences
- **Learning Lab Analysis, may include the following:**
 - Participant evaluation on the day of the event.
 - Follow-up survey to gain feedback on event.
 - Follow-up phone calls to gain feedback on event.
 - Monitor/evaluate commitment-to-action implementation.
 - Baseline data for serving target population.

Definition of Terms

Commitment to Action: The application of reflection to action, the Learning Lab experience is tied to a responsibility for action; how will you continue the work? See also *Commitment to Action Plan*.

Closing Circle: Wrap-up activity using gracious space techniques to debrief and share personal narratives and affirmations of the event.

Gallery Walk: Participants move around the room or site and view work of other teams. This is often done as a follow-up or sharing of information rather than a report-out from each group. Teams should have a member at their station to answer questions as others move around the room.

Gracious Space: Intentional setting of a spirit and environment that promotes safe, trauma informed, public learning among participants who do not know each other or may have diverse ideas.

Learning Movement Activity: A group activity using pairs and movement to discuss a given topic or question as instructed by the facilitator. Not to exceed more than fifteen minutes. Pairs are instructed to walk shoulder-to-shoulder and not to stop and face each other while addressing the topic.

Line of Inquiry: The “question” that drives your Learning Lab; what it is that you want to learn more about or get better at.

Speak Out: Select group of participants (typically youth) often seated in the front or middle of the room in a circle during the *Speak Out* session. Participation is always voluntary and Learning Lab facilitators are responsible for using trauma informed methods of engagement throughout the Speak Out preparation.

Sample Speak Out Questions

1. How do we increase employment and education outcomes for our population of young people?
2. What are the most significant barriers to success that are experienced by our population of young people?
3. What does the population of young people with disabilities who have experienced homelessness need to be successful and how do their needs differ from those of other young people with disabilities?
4. What **ONE** systems change would you advise to make it easier for the VR and Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) professionals to assist in propelling more of our young people into postsecondary education and/or employment?

Sample Agenda

Time	Activity
9:00 – 9:30	Opening and Introductions
9:30 – 10:00	Introduction of Line-of-Inquiry and <i>Commitment-to-Action</i>
10:00 – 11:00	Question and Answer Session (Speak Out) #1: National Network For Youth (NN4Y) Board Members; Jewish Vocational Service
11:00 – 11:10	Break
11:10 – 12:30	Question and Answer Session (Speak Out) #2: Young people from Covenant House AK, NY and GA; AK Tribal VR; AK VR
12:30 – 1:00	Lunch
1:00 – 1:20	Learning Movement Activity
1:20 – 2:00	Preparation for <i>Commitment-to-Action</i> / Gallery Walk
2:00 – 2:15	Break
2:15 – 3:15	Finalize <i>Commitment-to-Action</i>
3:15 – 3:45	Closing Circle
3:45 – 4:00	Thank You Presentation, Adjourn

Sample Commitment-To-Action Plan

LEARNING LAB COMMITMENT TO ACTION:

What is your commitment related to engaging/re-engaging out-of-school youth with disabilities?

What action steps will you take to meet your commitment?

For each action step, consider:

Who needs to be involved:

What resources are needed:

What is the timeline/target completion dates for the action(s):

Part III. Additional Tools & Resources

MORE LEARNING LAB TOOLS

[Designing and Facilitating Vocational Rehabilitation \(VR\) Learning Labs](http://bit.ly/VRIlabs), was written by Lynda Tredway, Senior Associate at the Institute for Educational Leadership, to support vocational rehabilitation (VR) state agencies to better understand and utilize the Learning Lab model. The contents include “Getting Started with Learning Labs” and a variety of tools for planning and facilitation. Available online at: <http://bit.ly/VRIlabs>

RECOMMENDED READING

[Trauma Informed Methods of Engagement \(TIME\) for Youth Advocacy](https://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/fpS1508.pdf). Written by Debra Cady and Eric Lulow, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Child, Adolescent, and Family Branch. Available online at: <https://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/fpS1508.pdf>



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