

JAASEP

JOURNAL OF THE
AMERICAN ACADEMY *of*
SPECIAL EDUCATION
PROFESSIONALS



FALL 2014

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors' Perceived Influences on the Secondary Transition Planning Process and Postsecondary Outcomes of Students with Disabilities

Vickie Miller-Warren, Ed.D.

Abstract

Outside agencies such as vocational rehabilitation agencies are designed to help provide services such as job coaching, mental health services, tuition assistance, and life-skills training for students with disabilities during and after high school so that they may obtain postsecondary success (Gil, 2007). This study examined the perceived influences of vocational rehabilitation counselors regarding the secondary transition planning process and the postsecondary outcomes of graduates from the class of 2011 who were enrolled in a special education program while in high school. The study also examined how the vocational rehabilitation counselors utilized postsecondary follow-up data to improve and inform secondary transition planning. The results of this study revealed that more interagency collaboration among the adult support system of students with disabilities is needed in order to ensure postsecondary success.

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors' Perceived Influences on the Secondary Transition Planning Process and Postsecondary Outcomes of Students with Disabilities

Outside agencies such as vocational rehabilitation and mental health agencies designed to provide services such as job coaching, mental health services, tuition assistance, and life-skills training for students with disabilities during and after high school are instrumental in helping graduates of special education programs transition from adolescence to adulthood (Gil, 2007). Research reveals that it is important for educators to collaborate with outside agencies such as vocational rehabilitation to help provide services such as job coaching, mental health services, tuition assistance, and life skills training for students with disabilities during and after high school (Gil, 2007; Oertle & Trach, 2007; Test et al., 2009). Interagency collaboration involves the process of establishing relationships with outside agencies that include paying for or providing related services to students with disabilities after high school (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010). Establishing a relationship with outside agencies early on during the secondary transition planning process allows students with disabilities the opportunity to have access to rehabilitation professionals. According to Oertle and Trach (2007), the assistance of rehabilitation professionals is critical in providing support such as helping students with disabilities gain access to community and workplace resources so that they can become skillful contributors to society. Therefore, rehabilitation professionals need to be a part of the secondary transition planning process (Oertle & Trach). However, many rehabilitation professionals are never invited to participate in secondary transition planning meetings.

Research shows that in order for students to receive the maximum benefits from rehabilitation agencies, they need to understand who the rehabilitation providers are and the services that they provide (Neubert et al., 2002; Oertle & Trach; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). Studies also

show that students who receive vocational rehabilitation services have a better chance at securing employment after high school (Neubert et al., 2002; Oertle & Trach). Although schools typically make student referrals to rehabilitation agencies during high school, they often fail to invite the agency representatives to the transition meetings resulting in the students not receiving services until after graduation, if at all. The failure to invite agency representatives to transition meetings leads to representatives not really knowing how to assist students in achieving postsecondary goals (Oertle & Trach). Once teachers better inform rehabilitation agencies of the agencies' roles in transition, rehabilitation agencies will better understand the importance of their participation in high school transition meetings to help students reach their postsecondary outcomes. The students who wait until after graduation to register for rehabilitation services are faced with greater obstacles in achieving their postsecondary outcomes, which is why collaboration with rehabilitation agency representatives during secondary transition planning meetings is important (Oertle & Trach). Transition is a collaborative process that involves the assistance of outside agencies such as vocational rehabilitation agencies, and educators should ensure that students and their families are aware of the vocational rehabilitation services available to them well before high school graduation (Lindstrom et al., 2007).

Method

In order to increase an understanding of the influences of outside agencies such as vocational rehabilitation on graduates with disabilities' secondary transition planning process and postsecondary outcomes, this study utilized qualitative and quantitative research methods through a mixed methods design. This study also examined how vocational rehabilitation agency representatives utilize postsecondary follow-up data to make improvements to the secondary transition planning process. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected in an effort to obtain an understanding of the vocational rehabilitation counselors' perceptions about the secondary transition planning process and postsecondary outcomes as well as their use of postsecondary feedback to improve the secondary transition planning process. The following research questions were the focus of this mixed methods study.

1. What are the perceived influences that outside agency representatives such as vocational rehabilitation counselors provided in the secondary transition planning process and postsecondary outcomes of graduates with disabilities?
2. How do outside agency representatives such as vocational rehabilitation counselors utilize postsecondary follow-up data to improve and inform secondary transition planning?

Participants

The participants consisted of four vocational rehabilitation counselors who were given a survey consisting of 13 closed-ended questions and three open-ended questions to complete on nine different graduates with disabilities from the class of 2011. Approximately 39 of the graduates from the class of 2011 had individual education plans and were receiving special education services at the time that they graduated from a rural high school located in a southern state. Only 23% of the class of 2011 graduates with disabilities reportedly had an outside agency representative such as a vocational rehabilitation counselor, according to a post-school survey

administered to their parents/guardians as a part of a larger study performed on the same graduates from which this study is derived. No other potential outside agency representatives, besides the four vocational rehabilitation counselors, were identified to participate in this study.

Instrumentation

The closed-ended *National Study of Transition Policies and Practices in State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies* survey taken from the Rehabilitation Services Administration was adapted and administered to the four vocational rehabilitation counselor participants for the purpose of determining their perceived influences on the secondary transition planning process. The survey also acquired information from the participants regarding their influences on the postsecondary outcomes of the class of 2011 graduates with disabilities as well as how they used postsecondary follow-up data to improve secondary transition planning. Permission was given from the creators to use and adapt the Likert-scale section D entitled *Transition Services* of the survey for the purpose of this study. The validity and reliability of the *National Study of Transition Policies and Practices in State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies* survey is supported by the University of Minnesota and Colorado State University in which an extensive review of the literature relevant to special education and vocational rehabilitation on the transition of high school students was performed before creating the survey (Norman et al., 2006).

The validity of the following three open-ended survey questions was based on a review of the literature that revealed that outside agency representatives such as vocational rehabilitation counselors should be involved in the secondary transition planning process of students with disabilities to help them achieve postsecondary success (Gil, 2007; Oertle & Trach, 2007; Test et al., 2009).

1. What role do you feel secondary transition planning played in the postsecondary outcomes of the graduate (Gil, 2007; Oertle & Trach, 2007; Test et al., 2009)?
2. How do you follow-up with the postsecondary outcomes of the graduate and how do you utilize the follow-up results (Gil, 2007; Oertle & Trach, 2007; Test et al., 2009)?
3. Is there any additional information that you would like to share?

Procedures

The administration of the vocational rehabilitation counselors' survey was a part of a larger ongoing data collection system that started in 2012 as a part of a larger study that consisted of a varied data collection system that included input from teachers, parents, and administrators of graduates formerly enrolled in special education from the class of 2011. A proxy from the Local Education Agency was used to distribute and collect surveys from the vocational rehabilitation counselors who were previously identified as the outside agency representatives of nine of the graduates from the class of 2011 via information provided by the parents/guardians of the graduates. The surveys were administered to the vocational rehabilitation counselors who were currently working with the former graduates with disabilities from the class of 2011 one year after they graduated from high school. The high school graduates included former students who had an Individual Education Plan (IEP) during their senior year of high school and completed

high school with the state option of a standard high school diploma, an occupational high school diploma, or a certificate of completion.

Data Analysis

Data compiled from the surveys were analyzed utilizing content analysis and aggregated percentages. Content analysis of the vocational rehabilitation counselors’ responses to the surveys resulted in a theme of a lack of outside agency support during the secondary transition planning process of students and more outside agency support after the students completed high school.

Results

Closed-ended Survey Responses

Note that N represents the number of graduates from the class of 2011 who were currently working or had recently worked with the vocational rehabilitation counselors at the time that the survey was distributed. The rating scale for the 13 closed-ended vocational rehabilitation counselors’ survey questions ranged from 1 to 5 with 1= never or almost never, 2=occasionally, 3=half the time, 4=frequently, 5=always or almost always. Table 1 below reveals the results.

Table 1

Vocational Rehabilitation Survey Closed-Ended Responses

| Question | Total (N) | Never or almost never (n) | Occasionally (n) | Half the time (n) | Frequently (n) | Always or almost always (n) |
|--|-----------|---------------------------|------------------|-------------------|----------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. You participated in an IEP/transition plan for the graduate before the individual completed high school. | 9 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 4 |
| 2. You communicated with local education agency personnel to discuss helpful approaches and strategies for the graduate. | 9 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 7 |
| 3. You provided career counseling and guidance services to the graduate. | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. You conducted or sponsored appropriate transition/vocational assessments to determine | 9 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 4 |

the service needs of the graduate in the areas of postsecondary education and employment.

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5. You participated in supporting the graduate in work-based learning, career and technical education, and other vocational services. | 9 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 7 |
| 6. You arranged for participation of the graduate in unpaid work experiences. | 9 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 7. You arranged for the participation of the graduate in paid work experiences. | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 9 |
| 8. You advised local education agency staff to help them determine the accommodations and the assistive technology needed by the graduate while the individual was still in high school, in order to achieve postsecondary education and/or employment goals. | 9 | 0 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 9. You arranged for job coaches and other resources needed for the graduate to participate in community-based employment. | 9 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| 10. You provided support to the graduate in postsecondary education after exiting high school (for example by providing supports related to transportation, tuition, books, dormitory costs, assistive | 9 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |

technology, personal counseling, professional tutoring, job coaching and job development).

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11. You provided support to the graduate to participate in vocational training (e.g. by providing supports related to transportation, tuition, books, dormitory costs, assistive technology, personal counseling, professional tutoring, job coaching and job development). | 9 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

| | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 12. You follow-up on the graduate who has moved on to postsecondary education or employment and connect him/her with resources when appropriate. | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 5 |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 13. You facilitated placement of the graduate in employment and training prior to high school graduation, with plans for post-graduation follow-up. | 9 | 8 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

Most of the vocational rehabilitation counselors indicated that they “occasionally” (44.4%) or “always or almost always” (44.4%) participated in the transition planning for the graduates before they completed high school. Most of the vocational rehabilitation counselors (77.7%) indicated they “always or almost always” communicated with local education agency personnel to discuss helpful approaches and strategies for the graduates. The majority of the vocational counselors responded in question 3 that they either “frequently” (44.4%) or “always or almost always” (55.5%) provided career counseling and guidance services to the graduates. Most of the vocational counselors indicated that they “frequently” (44.4%) or “always or almost always” (44.4%) participated in supporting the graduates in work-based learning, career and technical

education, and other vocational services. The majority of the counselors pointed out that they “never or almost never” (77.7%) arranged for participation of the graduates in unpaid work experiences, but pointed out that they overwhelmingly “always or almost always” (100%) arranged for paid work experiences for the graduates. In response to question 8, the counselors overwhelmingly indicated that they “occasionally” (100%) advised local education agency staff to help them determine the accommodations and the assistive technology needed by the graduates, while the students were still in high school, in order to achieve postsecondary education and employment goals. On the other hand, if the vocational rehabilitation counselors had been more insistent in this area then it might have prevented the unsuccessful postsecondary outcomes of many of the graduates.

The vocational rehabilitation counselors were at opposite ends of the rating scale when it came to question 9 regarding whether they arranged for job coaches and other resources needed for the graduates to participate in community-based employment. The majority of the counselors either chose “never or almost never” (44.4%) or “always or almost always” (44.4%) for their response to survey question 9. Interestingly, most of the counselors indicated that they “never or almost never” (66.6%) provided support to the graduates to participate in postsecondary education, which is a major responsibility of outside agency representatives. However, most of the vocational rehabilitation counselors indicated that they “always or almost always” (44.4%) provided support to the graduates to participate in vocational training. In response to question 12, the counselors indicated that they follow-up with graduates who move on to postsecondary education or employment and connect them with resources when appropriate “frequently” (44.4%) or “always or almost always” (55.5%), and utilize the follow-up information to assist the graduates as needed. For the last question, the vocational rehabilitation counselors overwhelmingly indicated that they “never or almost never” (88.8%) facilitated placement of the graduates in employment and training prior to high school graduation. Yet, it is typically the responsibility of the high school staff in collaboration with outside agency representatives such as vocational rehabilitation counselors to assist students with employment and training prior to high school graduation.

The closed-ended responses to the vocational rehabilitation counselors’ survey indicated a 23.9% response rating of “never or almost never”, a 15.4% rating of “occasionally”, a 2.6% rating of “half the time”, a 12.8% rating of “frequently”, and a 45.3% rating of “always or almost always”. It is interesting to point out that question 7, which read, “you arranged for the participation of the graduate in paid work experiences,” always received a response rating of 5 meaning that this experience “always or almost always” occurred for the graduates served by the vocational rehabilitation counselors who participated in the survey, therefore, indicating that most of the graduates served by the counselors were exposed to some type of employment opportunities. Nonetheless, the vocational rehabilitation counselors neglected to help many of the graduates secure employment or achieve any other postsecondary aspirations.

Open-ended Responses

The tables below demonstrate the frequent responses to the three open-ended questions on the survey that followed a theme of consistent postsecondary follow-up with the graduates by the vocational rehabilitation counselors. Table 2 demonstrates the responses regarding the role of secondary transition planning on the graduates’ postsecondary outcomes.

Table 2

Vocational Rehabilitation Survey: Role of Secondary Transition Planning on Graduates' Outcomes

| Question | Responses |
|---|---|
| What role do you feel secondary transition planning played in the postsecondary outcomes of the graduate? | <p>Made student self-sufficient</p> <p>Made student confident and determined to succeed</p> <p>Provided many students with unattainable goals</p> <p>Allowed student to accommodate his disability and ask for help when needed</p> |

The responses of the vocational rehabilitation counselors regarding the role that they felt the secondary transition plan played in the postsecondary outcomes of the graduates revealed that secondary transition planning successfully provided students with self-determination skills but often provided students with unattainable postsecondary goals.

Table 3 below represents the responses of the vocational rehabilitation counselors regarding postsecondary follow-up.

Table 3

Vocational Rehabilitation Survey: Postsecondary Follow-up

| Question | Responses |
|--|--|
| How do you follow-up with the postsecondary outcomes of the graduate and how do you utilize the follow-up results? | <p>Follow-up annually and use the results to provide guidance based on graduate's needs</p> <p>Lost track of graduate due to the graduate frequently relocating</p> <p>Follow-up every 30-90 days due to her intensive needs</p> |

Follow-up with the college student every semester and discuss his progress with him

The data revealed that the vocational rehabilitation counselors consistently follow-up with the graduates with disabilities that they serve and utilize the follow-up results to help the graduates obtain postsecondary success. Yet, there was no mention of utilizing the follow-up data to inform and improve secondary transition planning in collaboration with the high school staff.

Table 4 below presents additional information shared by the vocational rehabilitation counselors.

Table 4

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Survey: Additional Information

| Question | Responses |
|---|---|
| Is there any additional information that you would like to share? | The family did not work well with the high school staff |
| | No |

The vocational rehabilitation counselors did not have much additional information to share. However, one of the vocational rehabilitation counselors pointed out that the family of one of the graduates did not collaborate well with the high school teachers when the graduate was in high school which could have influenced the lack of success of the graduate in achieving the intended postsecondary goals.

By way of summary, the responses to the vocational rehabilitation counselor surveys indicated that the agency representatives were split on their involvement in the secondary transition planning process with half responding that they occasionally participated in the transition planning of the graduates and half responding that they always or almost always participated in the transition planning of the graduates. Although federal mandates such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) indicate that agency representatives should be a part of the secondary transition planning process, half of the vocational rehabilitation counselors did not feel like they were a part of that process. The vocational rehabilitation counselors' responses indicated that they felt that they had more of an influence on the postsecondary outcomes of the graduates than on the secondary transition planning process because they became more involved with helping the graduates after high school. Yet, the vocational rehabilitation counselors did point out that the secondary transition planning process made many of the graduates that they worked with more self-sufficient, but the graduates' lack of full cooperation with them played a major influence in their lack of success. One of the vocational rehabilitation counselors stated:

I have been attempting to contact one of the graduates monthly but she relocates

frequently. I keep trying to provide job placement and job coaching services but she will not leave me a forwarding phone number or address, so I try to track her down in the state database.

The research revealed that the adult support system consisting of parents, teachers, administrators, and outside agency representatives responsible for helping students with disabilities can best be described as mostly non-collaborative. Where these influences should come together to make student success as reasonable as possible, the research revealed a lack of communication, a lack of follow-up, and a lack of the adult support system to meet with one another to find common ground that would have better served the students during the secondary and postsecondary transition process. Indeed, the research revealed that students who had outside agency representative support such as that of vocational rehabilitation counselors were not very successful in achieving postsecondary success.

Discussion

Interestingly, the majority of the graduates who reportedly had a vocational rehabilitation counselor were not employed and only two were enrolled in a college or university. This was interesting because research indicates that interagency collaboration during the secondary transition planning process is vital in helping students achieve their postsecondary goals and that students who receive vocational rehabilitation services have improved chances of gaining employment after high school (Kellums & Morningstar, 2010; Neubert et al., 2002; Oertle & Trach, 2007; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). However, a recent case study involving college students with disabilities suggests that the success of graduates from special education programs is not the result of one type of community agency, but combined efforts with high schools and vocational rehabilitation centers is crucial in leading to positive outcomes for graduates with disabilities (Barber, 2012). The IDEA (2004) also mandates that an agency representative be invited to any IEP meeting in which transition services are being discussed once the student turns 16 years of age. According to the Kohler (1996) taxonomy, interagency collaboration is an important component of the secondary transition planning process in helping students gain postsecondary success. Interestingly, the vocational rehabilitation counselors were split on their involvement in the secondary transition planning meetings of the graduates as to whether they occasionally attended the meetings or always attended the meetings.

Therefore, the answer to research question number one, based on the findings of this study- is that the vocational rehabilitation agency representatives provided the perceived influence that the secondary transition planning process was a mere protocol that rarely involved their input. The findings also revealed that the perceived influences of the vocational rehabilitation counselors regarding the postsecondary outcomes of the graduates were that the graduates were responsible for their own outcomes regardless of how much assistance the counselors provided them. Based on the findings in regard to research question number two, the vocational rehabilitation counselors indicated on nearly half of the surveys that they only “occasionally” took part in the secondary transition planning process thus making it impossible to utilize follow-up data to inform and improve the secondary transition planning process.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations were associated with this study. Mainly, all of the outside agency representatives were local vocational rehabilitation counselors in which a small staff of counselors served the majority of the graduates who reportedly had outside agency representatives. This meant that many of the surveys were filled out by the same people, which led to some identical survey responses and a very small number of participants. The population that was focused on in this study was very transient and some of the graduates with disabilities from the class of 2011 could not be located to be asked if they had an outside agency representative available to survey. Some of the graduates chosen for the focal point of the study were not United States citizens, which affected their ability to receive services from the vocational rehabilitation counselors after being referred to the counselors. The graduates with disabilities that the study referred to were diagnosed with a wide range of disabilities from mild to severe, which impacted the range of postsecondary possibilities that the vocational rehabilitation counselors could provide for them. Lastly, the study involved graduates with disabilities from a small rural high school which means that it cannot be generalized to other high school graduates that were enrolled in special education.

Implications for Practice

An implication for practice is for improved collaboration during the secondary transition planning process between the adult support system of students receiving special education services to include a variety of outside agency representatives early on during the transition planning process. More collaboration among the adult support system of graduates with disabilities also needs to take place during the postsecondary transition process so that graduates will have more support in achieving their intended postsecondary goals. Schools need to become better at setting the climate for a collaborative environment and ensure that outside agency representatives always take part in secondary IEP transition planning meetings as the federal IDEA (2004) requires. It is critical that the entire adult system involved in the transition of students with disabilities from high school to adult life join together to improve the reprehensible act of what is currently being passed off as transition planning.

Conclusion

The results of the study suggest that the graduates received more assistance from outside agency representatives such as vocational rehabilitation counselors after graduating from high school than they did throughout the secondary transition planning process. This is mainly due to the fact that the high school staff did not appear to have included outside agency representatives in the secondary transition planning process. Nevertheless the majority of the graduates with vocational rehabilitation counselors were unsuccessful in obtaining employment or higher education, which are both major determinants of postsecondary success under the IDEA (2004). According to the National Council on Disability (2011), the current economy has disproportionately contributed to the challenges of graduates with disabilities in securing employment. Therefore, having an outside agency representative such as a vocational rehabilitation counselor does not guarantee postsecondary success. Nevertheless, more collaboration is needed among the adult support system of students with disabilities, which should include parents, teachers of special education, secondary administrators, and outside agency representatives such as vocational rehabilitation counselors, in order to better meet the secondary and postsecondary needs of students with

disabilities.

Until the adult support system of students with disabilities begin to collaborate in order to best serve the needs of the students, postsecondary failures will continue to be an issue for some of the most vulnerable citizens.

References

- Gil, L. (2007). Bridging the transition gap from high school to college. Preparing students with disabilities for a successful postsecondary experience. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 40*(2), 12-15. Retrieved from ERIC database.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. §1416 et seq. (2004).
- Kellems, R., & Morningstar, M. (2010). Tips for transition. *Council for Exceptional Children, 43*(2), 60-68.
- Kohler, P. D. (1996). *Taxonomy for transition programming: Linking research to practice*. Retrieved March 20, 2012, from University of Illinois, Transition Research Institute website <http://vms.cc.wmich.edu/~kohlerp/toc.html>
- Lindstrom, L., Paskey, J., Dickinson, J., Doren, B., Zane, C., & Johnson, P. (2007). Voices from the field: Recommended transition strategies for students and staff. *Journal for Vocational Special Needs Education, 29*(2), 4-15.
- National Council on Disability. (2011). *Technology's Impact on Employment and Opportunities for People with Disabilities*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Neubert, D. A., Moon, M. S., & Grigal, M. (2002). Post-secondary education and transition services for students ages 18-21 with significant disabilities. *Focus on Exceptional Children, 34*(8), 1-9.
- Norman, M., Mueller, P., Bourexis, P., Johnson, D., Timmons, J., Bremer, D., and Dugan, J. (2006). *A national study of transition policies and practices in state vocational rehabilitation agencies*. Retrieved July 28, 2012, from University of Minnesota, Institute of Community Integration website: <http://www.vrtransitionstudy.org/survey.html>
- Oertle, K., & Trach, J. (2007). Interagency collaboration: The importance of rehabilitation professionals' involvement in transition. *Journal of Rehabilitation, 73*(3), 36-44. Retrieved from EBSCO database.
- Test, D. W., Fowler, C. H., White, J., Richter, S., & Walker, A. (2009). Evidence-based secondary transition practices for enhancing school completion. *Exceptionality, 17*, 16-29. Doi:10.1080/09362830802590144
- Williams-Diehm, K. L., & Lynch, P. S. (2007). Student knowledge and perceptions of individual transition planning and its process. *The Journal for Vocational Special Needs Education, 29*(3), 13-21.

About the Author

Vickie Miller-Warren, Ed.D currently works as a public school special education program specialist in North Carolina. Her research interests include secondary and postsecondary transition for students with disabilities.