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Project SEARCH: Analysis of Employment Outcomes for Students with Disabilities Across Two Districts

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Abstract

Rehabilitation professionals have a major focus on competitive employment, which is a central component of adult life that provides not only economic benefits, but also a social network and enhanced self-esteem. The employment gap for individuals with disabilities has remained consistently high despite concerted efforts to provide access to quality job readiness training and a simultaneous increase in awareness of the value of diversity in the workforce. This study examined the outcomes of Project SEARCH, an employer-based transition program for young adults with disabilities that promotes partnerships among the school and community by utilizing a unique collaborative approach that brings the education system, employers, and rehabilitation services together to provide meaningful individualized employment experiences for students with disabilities. Findings suggest Project SEARCH appears to have the potential to address employment outcomes for young adults with various disabilities. Implications for practice and future research are also discussed.

Keywords: Project SEARCH, transition, employment, students with disabilities, post-school outcomes

**Project SEARCH: Analysis of Employment Outcomes for Students with Disabilities
Across Two School Districts**

Rehabilitation professionals have a major focus on competitive employment, which is a central component of adult life that provides not only economic benefits, but also a social network and enhanced self-esteem (Levinson & Palmer 2005; Rogan et al., 2002; U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, 2014). Achieving employment is the primary transition goal for the majority of secondary students with disabilities (Cameto et al., 2004). Researchers have suggested that the majority of youth with disabilities (90%) and their parents (78%) expect to have jobs and live independently by the age of 30 (Lipscomb et al., 2017). Given the positive impact of employment on a person's quality of life, it is particularly discouraging that young adults with disabilities continue to experience gaps, within their employment status ranging from 30% to 79% (National Council on Disability, 2011; Newman et al., 2011). Moreover, the employment gap for individuals with disabilities has remained consistently high despite concerted efforts to provide access to quality job readiness training and a simultaneous increase in awareness of the value of diversity in the workforce (Christensen et al., 2015). These data gaps indicate a need for both education and rehabilitation professionals to focus on improving secondary transition services and enhancing employment experiences for individuals with disabilities.

Federal law requires schools to address transition services for students with disabilities before the age of 16 years old to ensure their adequate preparation for life after school, including securing and maintaining competitive employment. Paraphrased from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), transition services are defined as a coordinated set of activities focused on improving student academic and functional achievement to facilitate their

movement from high school to post-secondary education, employment, and independent living. Extant transition literature has identified paid employment and community work experience as evidence-based predictors of positive post-secondary employment outcomes for students with disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2016; Test et al., 2009). To ensure students with disabilities receive quality work-based learning experiences, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA; 2014) mandates collaboration between secondary schools and vocational rehabilitation (VR) professionals. Therefore, local educational agencies, VR professionals, and employment service providers must collaborate to enhance meaningful work-based experiences for students with disabilities and improve their employment-related outcomes (Riesen & Oertle, 2019). A collaborative approach to the provision of work-based experiences facilitates informed choice and decision making, career exploration and work-related planning opportunities, development of relationships with employers and business owners, identification of local resources and work-place supports, and benefits planning assistance (Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators [ACRE], 2013; Ford, 2008). A cross-disciplinary collaboration between these organizations in the realm of the development and oversight process of work-based learning experiences may improve post-secondary employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

An evidence-based transition program that has promising applications for young adults with disabilities is Project SEARCH. With more than 620 program sites in 48 states and 10 countries, Project SEARCH utilizes an approach that is different from a typical school-to-work transition program for individuals with disabilities as it requires intensive, site-based internships and training in employability and independent living skills (Burress & Paninski, 2020). Throughout internships, Project SEARCH interns have opportunities to communicate and collaborate with one another, their job coach, site-based employees and coworkers within

departments. Interns are encouraged to follow the schedule of the site employees including following the same break schedule, attend department and team meetings, and participate in the planning of assigned tasks. Because of the inclusivity of Project SEARCH, interns develop and improve their social, communication, and vocational skills.

Project SEARCH is a large-scale, standardized, employment support model that has been implemented both domestically and internationally. While the overall purpose of the program is to support employment for individuals with differing abilities, it has some significant differences from other programs. As a whole, Project SEARCH is focused on employment as an outcome rather than focusing solely on skill development. The program has a specific focus on the relationship to services (e.g., transition connections, continuum of services from high school to adulthood, and applying learning to practice). It is important to note that Project SEARCH is an evidence-based program that is strongly tied to employment success.

Researchers have shown that Project SEARCH can result in positive outcomes for its participants (Christensen et al., 2015; Kaehne, 2015; Wehman et al., 2012). Reported national outcomes indicate that over 77% of all Project SEARCH graduates gain employment (Burress & Paninski, 2020). A growing body of research suggests the Project SEARCH program has positive competitive integrated employment outcomes for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and developmental disabilities (Shall et al., 2015; Shall et al., 2020; Wehman et al., 2012; Wehman et al., 2017; Wehman et al., 2020; Whittenburg et al., 2020); however, further research is needed to evaluate Project SEARCH outcomes for young adults with various types of disabilities and explore ways to improve their employment experiences.

While transition for students with disabilities has been the focus of research and educational policies for several decades, their success in achieving post-school employment

continues to be elusive. Therefore, transition programs must be strengthened to specifically address the poor employment outcomes experienced by individuals with disabilities. The purpose of this study was to: (a) discuss Project SEARCH and adaptations implemented by two school districts; (b) report the programs' outcomes and employment outcomes for interns; (c) examine the predictive relationship of various demographic variables to the category of employment; and (d) discuss the implications of Project SEARCH for rehabilitation professionals. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the Project SEARCH program outcomes in each school district in terms of completed internship and obtained employment?
2. What are the employment outcomes for Project SEARCH interns in each school district in terms of job type, hours worked, and wages earned?
3. Is there a relationship between employment categories and demographic characteristics of interns?

Project SEARCH

Program Overview

One essential and federally mandated requirement for rehabilitation professionals is to facilitate successful movement from high school to adult life for students with disabilities through the provision of effective transition services. Community work experience and coordinated transition services are recognized as key factors in successful transition for youth with disabilities. The hallmark of Project SEARCH is complete immersion in the workplace, which facilitates a seamless integration of classroom instruction and on-the-job training and support. The immersion of participants in the workplace aligns with the mission of the Transition Division for the National Rehabilitation Association to advance effective transition practices and

promote the employment and independence of young adults with disabilities by providing training to professionals who work with transition aged youth (National Rehabilitation Association, n.d.). The program also promotes partnerships among the school and community by utilizing a unique collaborative approach that brings the education system, employers, and rehabilitation services together to provide students with disabilities with meaningful individualized employment experiences (see Figure 1 for details). Project SEARCH also facilitates the development of a broad range of high-quality jobs within the employer organization or within the community and helps to bring about positive systemic changes in attitudes regarding people with disabilities (Rutkowski et al., 2006).

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

Project SEARCH employs a business-led, demand-side approach that is: (a) responsive to the needs of each employer; (b) offers full immersion in the workplace environment with the goal of competitive integrated employment; (c) provides explicit instruction in employment skills; and (d) provides follow-along job coaching support for interns and new hires (Muller et al., 2018). Project SEARCH is a 1- year program that students typically attend during their senior year of high school or after having met graduation requirements and remain in school to participate in a structured work study (Gross et al., 2018). The program consists of three consecutive 10-week internship rotations and daily classroom instruction that provides interns with nearly 600 hours of on-the-job work experience and skills training. Interns attend class for 1 hour each day and work on developing employment and social skills (e.g., building a professional portfolio, remaining on task, coping with frustration). Interns then work at their employment sites 5 hours per day with support from a job coach. Details of the Project SEARCH process are illustrated in Figure 2.

<INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE>

Vocational Rehabilitation Services

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is a federal-state program designed to help individuals with disabilities gain employment skills and become part of the workforce. As part of the business-led Project SEARCH approach, VR services are provided to participants. In order to be eligible for VR services, individuals must have a goal to become employed and have a documented disability which may result in a barrier to obtaining and maintaining employment. VR sponsors Project SEARCH interns and provides skills training and job development while the interns are enrolled in the program. VR personnel work with employers to support hiring individuals with disabilities for competitive integrated employment. In an effort to ensure these individuals gain competitive integrated employment, VR professionals attempt to match jobseekers with high demand jobs according to their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Specific Project SEARCH related recommendations for increased competitive integrated employment outcomes include job search assistance, job placement, on-site support and training, diagnostic and treatment services, and vocational training (Shall et al., 2020).

Project SEARCH Adaptations

When implementing Project SEARCH, school districts may make adaptations, but they must be guided by the same student-centered model, incorporate all critical components of Project SEARCH, and reflect on the essential steps of the Project SEARCH process. However, the operational elements may differ across districts to better support their unique student population and meet the community needs. Local Project SEARCH adaptations undertaken by two public school districts are described in this section.

Orange County Public Schools. Orange County Public Schools (OCPS) is a large, urban school district in Florida that serves over 213,000 students, including approximately 20% of students identified as having a disability. OCPS is the 9th largest school district in the United States and the 4th largest in the state of Florida. OCPS consists of 20 high schools and a transition school, which enrolls 18-22 years old students who have met graduation requirements, deferred obtaining their diploma, and sought to continue a structured work study. A component of the continuum of services for the transition school includes Project SEARCH.

Project SEARCH has been a partner with OCPS since 2008 and currently consists of three job sites located in medical, retail and hospitality facilities. At the time of program inception, the OCPS district administrator for transition programs served as a liaison with business partners and closely collaborated with a Project SEARCH program director on the development of the job sites and identification of interns. Support from the Project SEARCH program director gradually faded as the district started the new program with three business partners, which included two hospitals and one convention hotel.

Each Project SEARCH site in OCPS is staffed with one certified exceptional student education teacher, one employment specialist, and one job coach (latter provided by a business partner). Enrollment at Project SEARCH sites is currently dependent on the number of students allowed by each business partner. Typically, 8 to 10 students are enrolled at each Project SEARCH site. However, due to exponential growth, business partners permit additional interns. On average, 25 students participate in Project SEARCH each year.

Data collection has been bolstered since the inception of Project SEARCH at OCPS. In 2015, the process shifted from evaluating students at each site to a district-wide evaluation system designed to assess over 40 work habits and skills (e.g., ethical work behavior, decision

making, problem solving, communication). Students are evaluated based on their level of independence in completion of each skill. In addition, students practice self-evaluation and meet weekly with their teacher or employment specialist, to review targeted work habits and set individual goals.

When considering Project SEARCH business partners, preference is given to businesses representing industries that are dominant in the community. This emphasis increases the likelihood of interns obtaining employment upon completion of their internship. Tourism and hospitality, retail, medical, and technology are the primary industries within the Central Florida community. The Project SEARCH model allows adaptations for OCPS students; however, the students have to meet requirements for high school graduation, defer obtaining their high school diploma, participate in work study, and are able to complete a minimum of three work rotations prior to their 22nd birthday. To participate in Project SEARCH, students must be recommended by their teachers, have community-based vocational education experience, complete an application, and interview with a Project SEARCH teacher and business partner liaison. In addition, each student enrolled in Project SEARCH must be a client with a local VR. Students selected for a Project SEARCH internship enroll in a vocational course (i.e., Career Experience 9-12) and complete a 1-year unpaid internship that consists of three job rotations.

Frisco Independent School District. Frisco Independent School District (FISD) is a suburban district in North Texas that currently serves 62,390 students, including approximately 6,000 students identified as having a disability. FISD is one of the fastest growing districts in the United States with a 30% growth in total enrollment annually. Situated in the outlying suburb of Dallas, FISD benefits from rapid growth and close proximity to major urban centers and headquarters of multiple large corporations.

The Project SEARCH program was launched during the 2015 school year with only eight interns. Currently, Project SEARCH operates at one site with 12 interns selected from among 18-20 years old students who have completed all requirements for high school graduation. As the district grows, the need for expansion of secondary transition services continues to increase to meet the vocational needs of adult students with disabilities. When Project SEARCH began to demonstrate the viability of this vocational training model in the North Texas region, FISD and Project SEARCH partnered their efforts in meeting vocational training needs of students with disabilities in the community.

FISD has a strong relationship with business partners in the community, especially those representing the hospitality industry. As many large corporations began to move into the area, the hospitality industry began to grow. For example, the Embassy Suites and Conference Center, which sits in the heart of the district, was a natural partner for hosting the Project SEARCH program. The hospitality industry proves to be an ideal partner in bridging the training gap from high school to post-secondary employment. All of the program participants receive training while still in high school through work experience in hospitality courses at the district's Career and Technical Education center. As a result, Project SEARCH participants have the necessary prerequisite vocational skills to engage in the internship offered by the program.

Similar to OCPS, all FISD program participants are still enrolled as students in the school district. In order to apply for the program, students must have met the state requirements for graduation, agreed to defer receipt of their diploma, and signed a participant agreement indicating that competitive integrated employment will be obtained upon program completion. High school seniors are nominated by their classroom teacher to apply for the program. After a comprehensive review of their Individualized Education Program (IEP) and transition plan,

students are required to complete an extensive application and interview process and have a post-secondary goal of competitive employment. After being accepted into the program, interns participate in three 9-week job rotations in each area of the large hotel and conference center. During the final stages of the program, interns work closely with the employment provider to obtain competitive integrated employment in the community.

Method

Design

This study was a descriptive, non-experimental study that used a retrospective approach of analysis of extant data to answer the research questions. A retrospective records review was used to analyze demographic and employment factors related to Project SEARCH outcomes. As an additional element, a correlational research approach was used to study the relationship between the dependent variable (category of employment) and the predictor variables (disability type, gender, ethnicity, internship completion, and level of employment). Project SEARCH data was gathered from a convenience sample that consisted of two school districts, OCPS and FISD. Both school districts have been identified by national Project SEARCH to have met the criteria of starting and operating Project SEARCH programs including partnerships with local VR partners, long-term supported employment providers, and host business sites. The study was approved by the Institutional Research Review Board at the first author's institution.

Participants

The participants in this study included 158 students with disabilities who participated in Project SEARCH high school transition programs in two school districts. The sample was compiled from the electronic databases of two sites, OCPS (Orlando, Florida) and FISD (Frisco, Texas) and included students with disabilities enrolled in Project SEARCH between 2015 and

2020 academic years. Four participants did not have complete data and they were not included in the linear regression data analysis. The final sample size for regression analysis was 154 students.

Data Collection

Data for this study was collected from two sites, OCPS and FISD, and included examination of deidentified student information and program outcomes. The sites were requested to forward anonymized data on all Project SEARCH interns who participated in the program in 2015-2020 and were asked to provide demographic information as well as employment outcomes for each individual. In total, 158 student records were reviewed to extract relevant data.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using Excel and the Reg program. Descriptive statistics were used to identify demographic characteristics of the participants, as well as program and employment outcomes. The program and employment outcomes data were separated into two site-based areas, OCPS and FISD, and were also reported as total for both sites. All variables were categorical; therefore, frequency and percentage were examined.

In addition, data were analyzed using inferential statistics. Linear regression analysis was employed to determine the extent to which there is a line of prediction between the dependent variable (category of employment) and the predictor variables (disability type, gender, ethnicity, internship completion, and level of employment). Regression coefficients and *p*-values were used to express the strengths of the relationship between the predictor and outcomes variables and to determine which variables in particular were significant predictors of the outcome variable.

Results

All Project SEARCH participants were young adults ages 18-22. The majority of participants were male ($n = 89$; 56%). By ethnicity, the majority of participants were Caucasian ($n = 49$; 31%), Hispanic ($n = 49$; 31%), and African-American ($n = 46$; 29%). By disability classification, the majority of participants were students with ID ($n = 80$; 51%), ASD ($n = 33$; 21%), and SLD ($n = 21$; 13%).

Some similarities and differences emerged when comparing the demographics of the participants at both sites. For example, the majority of participants at OCPS and FISD were male ($n = 70$; 55% and $n = 19$; 61% respectively). However, Caucasian ($n = 30$; 24%), Hispanic ($n = 49$; 38%), and African-American ($n = 40$; 31%) were the three main ethnic groups represented at OCPS. In comparison, the participants at FISD were mainly represented by individuals of Caucasian ($n = 19$; 61%), African-American ($n = 6$; 19%), and Asian ($n = 4$; 13%) ethnic backgrounds. Another difference was the primary disability category. The majority of participants at OCPS were individuals with Intellectual Disability (ID; $n = 73$; 57.5%), specific learning disability (SLD; $n = 21$; 16.5%), and autism spectrum disorder (ASD; $n = 20$; 15.7%). At FISD, the majority of participants were individuals with ASD ($n = 13$; 41.9%), ID ($n = 9$; 29.0%), and other health impairment (OHI; $n = 8$; 25.8%). A detailed description of the participants' demographics is found in Table 1.

<INSERT TABLE 1 HERE>

Research Question 1: Program Outcomes

The program outcomes data were separated into two site-based areas and divided into the following categories: (a) program participants, (b) completed internship, and (c) obtained employment (see Table 2 for details). In total, 183 students participated in the Project SEARCH

program during the reported time period. Out of those students who participated, 158 completed their internship and 147 obtained employment with the business partner or in the community. For OCPS, 127 students (84%) completed their internship and 119 students (78%) obtained employment. All students ($n=31$; 100%) at FISD completed their internship and 28 students (90%) obtained employment.

<INSERT TABLE 2 HERE>

Research Question 2: Employment Outcomes

Employment outcomes were reported in terms of (a) employment categories (e.g., medical, retail); (b) employment (e.g., part time, full time); and (c) wages per hour (i.e., \$7-10/hour, >\$10/hour) as presented in Table 3.

<INSERT TABLE 3 HERE>

Overall, Hospitality/Tourism was the employment category for the majority of students ($n=70$; 48%), which corresponds with the data obtained for OCPS and FISD districts ($n=57$; 48% and $n=13$; 46% respectively). The second largest category was Retail: overall ($n=31$; 21%), OCPS ($n=21$; 18%) and FISD ($n=10$; 36%). For OCPS, Food Service was also the second highest category ($n=21$; 18%). The Food Service category accounted for 24 overall participants (16%) and three participants at FISD (11%). The Medical category accounted for 16 overall participants (11%) and 16 participants at OCPS (13%). The Medical category was not represented at FISD. A total of six participants (4%) were reported under the category of Other, which corresponds with four participants at OCPS and two participants at FISD (3% and 7% respectively).

The majority of overall program participants ($n=123$; 78%) were employed part-time as well as those at OCPS and FISD ($n=108$; 85% and $n=15$; 48% respectively). A total of 24 participants (15%) were employed full-time. Eleven participants at OCPS (9%) and 13

participants at FISSD (42%) were employed full-time. The total number of unemployed participants was 11 (7%), which corresponds with similar numbers at OCPS and FISSD ($n=8$; 6% and $n=3$; 10% respectively). In terms of employment wages, the majority of program participants were earning \$7-\$10/hour. All program participants at OCPS were earning \$7-\$10/hour. At FISSD, the majority of participants ($n=15$; 54%) were earning more than \$10/hour.

Research Question 3: Linear Regression

In order to examine the relationships among the predictor variables and the category of employment, it was important to first examine the overall correlations among the descriptive statistics. As shown in the following table, there was a lack of significant correlations among the predictor variables and the category of employment for students with disabilities. See Table 4 for details.

<INSERT TABLE 4 HERE>

In order to examine the predictive relationship of various demographic variables to the category of employment, we applied a linear regression analysis using the regression add-on to Microsoft Excel. Residual vs Observed data was analyzed and the linear regression was calculated at a 95% confidence level with a critical t of 1.976. The model produced an R^2 of .073 which did not demonstrate a statistically significant prediction of employment category by the various predictor variables (see Table 5).

<INSERT TABLE 5 HERE>

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine Project SEARCH transition program for young adults with disabilities, discuss program adaptations, and report the programs' outcomes that could be used by researchers and rehabilitation practitioners to enhance the chances of

success in competitive employment of young adults with disabilities. The findings provide a broader understanding of Project SEARCH adaptations in urban and suburban districts and indicate positive employment outcomes for students with various types of disabilities.

Although the demographic characteristics of Project SEARCH interns at OCPS and FISSD have some variations, the present study's findings generally suggest that the majority of Project SEARCH interns were individuals of Caucasian, Hispanic, and African-American backgrounds (31%, 31%, and 29% respectively). In terms of disability categories, the majority of interns were individuals with ID, ASD, and SLD (51%, 21%, and 13% respectively). By gender, the majority of interns were male (56%). The current body of literature is scarce to adequately compare Project SEARCH interns' demographic characteristics and their employment outcomes. However, the present study's findings generally correspond with the results of one longitudinal study in upstate New York that described Project SEARCH interns as male (55%), Caucasian (66%), and Hispanic (15%; Christensen et al., 2015). By disability, the majority of the interns were described as individuals with ID (38%), ASD (14%), multiple disabilities (13%), SLD (12%), and OHI (11%; Christensen et al., 2015).

Research Question 1

The present study reported a program completion rate of 86% for Project SEARCH interns, which aligns with Christensen et al.'s (2015) findings who also reported an 86% completion rate. The present study's findings have also demonstrated that the majority of Project SEARCH interns were employed part-time (78%) making on average \$7-10 per hour. Similarly, Christensen and Richardson (2017) have also reported part-time employment outcomes for Project SEARCH graduates who were working an average of 18 hours per week at \$9.25 per hour.

Further, the program outcomes findings suggest that Project SEARCH has been effective for students with disabilities in both urban and suburban school districts. Project SEARCH graduates in both OCPS and FISD programs gained competitive employment (78% and 90% respectively) by exceeding the 63% successful employment outcomes reported by Christensen and Richardson (2017) and the national employment outcomes of 77% that was described earlier. At the 2019 Project SEARCH Annual Conference in Anaheim, California, 192 program sites from 37 states and 4 countries were recognized for achieving 70% to 100% employment for their graduates. Based on the presented study findings, both OCPS and FISD fall within this range for recognition.

Research Question 2

The majority of Project SEARCH interns were employed in the hospitality/tourism (48%), retail (21%), food services (16%), and medical fields (11%). In addition, the present study's findings suggest that the access to job opportunities within given industries may differ across districts to better support the unique student population and meet the community needs. For example, OCPS is located in Central Florida which is home to a multitude of theme parks with its economy driven by tourism. In correspondence with the local community needs, the majority of Project SEARCH graduates secure employment within the hospitality/tourism industry.

One indirect finding of the present study should be noted. Data analysis revealed that the Project SEARCH enrollment at OCPS shifted from interns with high-incidence disabilities (e.g., SLD, OHI) to students with low-incidence disabilities (e.g., ASD, ID). This might be indicative of a necessity for additional support to address the development of employability and independence skills among students with more significant needs that could result in increased

likelihood of securing meaningful, gainful employment within the community for these individuals whose employment outcomes remain elusive (Newman et al., 2011).

Research Question 3

The results of the linear regression model did not demonstrate the ability to predict the category of employment based on demographic variables. While a statistically significant R^2 would add to the evidence-basis of Project SEARCH, the results are not surprising. Across the two school districts, the vast majority of students completed internships and obtained some level of employment (e.g., part-time or full-time). The lack of ability to predict the category of employment likely means that employment in a particular type of occupation is random for individuals completing Project SEARCH. The randomness may be tied to the partnerships that have been obtained by the district and the number of positions available in the job market. In other words, regardless of a student's gender, ethnicity, or type of disability, they obtain employment in their local job market, but that employment is random among the various Project SEARCH partners.

Practical Suggestions

Rehabilitation professionals who work with Project SEARCH or other similar employment support programs likely find similar results in terms of employment for their clients after completion of the program. However, the reality is that many individuals who participate in employment support programs face some significant employment challenges, such as unpaid internships, low-level wages under \$9/hour, and placement in entry-level positions. Unfortunately, these challenges leave many individuals with an inability to sustain independent living.

In order to affect more positive outcomes for clients, it may be necessary for rehabilitation professionals to take a stronger social justice stance and direct their advocacy toward: (a) building stronger bridges with local businesses; (b) educating the management/hiring teams about working with individuals who have differing abilities; (c) seeking partnerships where clients can enter the workforce at higher pay levels and more advanced job duties; (d) and raising social consciousness of the value that is being added for the local businesses who participate in the program. While advocacy is a central role for rehabilitation professionals, we suggest a more targeted approach that considers the variables outlined above.

Limitations

The findings of the present study must be considered in light of several limitations. First, the scope of data collection was limited to only two sites. Thus, the analyzed data pertains to a relatively small geographic area and, therefore, limits the generalizability of this study's findings. The second limiting factor relates to the process for data collection that is reliant on school districts and outside providers to review their records and submit updates on each participant's progress. Because the data were self-reported by the districts' staff, it may reflect bias or contain errors of omission. Another limiting factor is that the existing empirical research on Project SEARCH is scarce, which makes it difficult to compare the present study's findings. It should also be noted that at the time the data was collected, some students were still in the process of interviewing with potential employers and potentially could have gained employment. As a result, it is possible that the actual employment outcomes for the program are underreported.

Implications

Despite such limitations, several implications for research and practice emerged from this study that can be used by researchers and rehabilitation practitioners to promote employment and future independence of young adults with disabilities. First, the present study adds to the existing body of transition literature and strengthens the foundation for better understanding of the impact of Project SEARCH on employment experiences of students with disabilities. To our knowledge, this study is among the first to analyze Project SEARCH outcomes in an urban and a suburban district and to employ a linear regression analysis.

Further, the results of this study have implications for district administrators, transition specialists, and other rehabilitation professionals working with students transitioning to employment. To enhance the chances of success in competitive employment of young adults with disabilities, transition specialists, coordinators, rehabilitation counselors and other professionals working with transition aged youth strive for securing employment and independence of young adults with disabilities, like those in Project SEARCH. VR specialists who support effective transition programming and practices may find this study beneficial as it provides a result driven model of interagency collaboration with local school districts.

The study also demonstrates the role both VR and local education agencies (LEAs) have in supporting competitive employment and development of employability skills for individuals with disabilities. Working within the framework of the federal mandate provided under the WIOA, state VR agencies connected with LEAs can support pre-employment transition services for transition aged youth through work-based learning and job shadowing programs. Additional recommendations and web-based resources are presented in Table 6. It is anticipated that education and rehabilitation professionals and other main stakeholders will explore these

resources as well as the reported study findings and consider them when addressing the employment needs of young adults with disabilities.

<INSERT TABLE 6 HERE>

Future Directions

Researchers and rehabilitation professionals may look for additional ways to improve transition to employment in secondary schools for students with disabilities. Specifically, additional research on the effects of Project SEARCH on employment outcomes is needed. A large-scale study of Project SEARCH documenting nation-wide employment outcomes would contribute to a more thorough understanding of the overall impact of Project SEARCH. Studies are needed to compare Project SEARCH to other school- and business-based models. An important area of research may include in-depth examination of each of the program's components and how they contribute to participants' success in obtaining employment.

Future research may examine how Project SEARCH affects both job readiness and employment rates, especially for students with significant disabilities. Rehabilitation professionals may also look into investigating the collaborative approach that brings the education system, employers, and outside agencies (e.g., rehabilitation services) together to enhance transition experiences for students with disabilities. It also might be useful to conduct longitudinal research studies on employment outcomes for students with disabilities who participated in Project SEARCH. One important responsibility for future researchers is not only to conduct studies that meet high quality standards, but also to translate research to practice and provide school professionals with practical tools for implementation in the school setting (Davis & Cumming, 2019).

Conclusions

Due to the ongoing post-secondary challenges young adults with disabilities face in terms of obtaining and maintaining employment, preparation for employment has become the primary focus of many rehabilitation professionals. Project SEARCH is an employer-based education and employment transition program for young adults with disabilities. The findings of this study support the notion that Project SEARCH is successfully preparing students with disabilities to obtain employment in both urban and suburban communities. While individuals in Project SEARCH are successful in finding employment, the match between participants and job type is random. With high reported rates of employment, the Project SEARCH program appears to have the potential to enhance the employment outcomes for young adults with various types of disabilities. Education and rehabilitation professionals who work with transition-aged young adults with disabilities can explore the findings and suggestions to collaboratively facilitate successful transition to employment for young adults with disabilities and ultimately increase the likelihood of positive adult outcomes.

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