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State Trends in the Vocational Rehabilitation Engagement of Young Adults with Intellectual Disabilities: 2002-2011

By Alberto Migliore and Jean E. Winsor

Experiencing paid employment during and immediately after high school is a critical step on the path toward economic self-sufficiency in adulthood. Young adults with disabilities interested in gaining employment experiences may seek support from vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs. In this Data Note, we examine the extent to which young adults with intellectual disabilities engage with their state VR programs.

One way for assessing young adult engagement is to look at the number of them who exit the program, which implies that they either applied or were referred to the program. Specifically, we examined the average number of young adults 16 to 30 years old who exited their state VR programs between 2002 and 2011. To allow for fair comparison across states with different population sizes, we report the VR engagement rate as the number of young adults who would have exited a state VR program if that state had a population of only 1,000 people with disabilities.

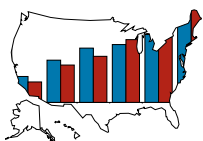
Figure 1 shows that the VR engagement rate varied from four in Texas to 24 in North Carolina and Missouri, a six-fold larger figure. In other words, if these two states had the same population of 1,000 young adults with disabilities, the number of young adults with intellectual disabilities who exited the VR program would have been four in Texas and 24 in North Carolina. Asterisks next to some states highlight VR engagement rates that were either substantially lower or substantially higher than the national average. Red bars highlight substantial decreases, and blue bars highlight substantial increases in the VR engagement rates during the 10 years examined. The greatest decrease was in Oklahoma (-8.2% annual average change), whereas the largest increase was in Washington (+11%). In interpreting these findings, we should keep in mind that low VR engagement rates in some states could be explained in part by young adults receiving services from other programs. In addition, although a higher VR engagement rate is encouraging because it shows that more young adults sought vocational support, ultimately it is the proportion of these young adults who gained employment that matters.

Based on these findings, state administrators should closely monitor whether young adults with intellectual disabilities in their states are receiving adequate support services. Moreover, administrators should consider exploring whether higher and growing VR engagement rates in some states indicate the existence of promising practices that could be adopted elsewhere. Reaching out to young adults with intellectual disabilities who wish to gain employment experiences is a critical first step for promoting their progression toward economic self-sufficiency in adulthood.

In 2011, a total of 33,540 young adults with intellectual disabilities age 16 to 30 exited the national VR program (13% of all case closures in this age range).

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Figure 1. States' Average VR Engagement Ratio for Young Adults with an Intellectual Disability

