



Toward Higher Education for all Youth with Disabilities: An Efficacy Study

The RRTC on Employment Among Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities is conducting six studies aimed at developing effective practices to improve employment outcomes of transition-aged youth. This plain language research brief provides an overview of Research Study #2.

The goal of this study is to test an online training and technical assistance model to encourage paid internships and employment opportunities for college students with disabilities. This study builds on previous work that focuses on providing training followed by year-long technical assistance to college staff supporting students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We will update the training course and modify the technical assistance based on feedback.

Study Overview

Our study will research the impact of an online training program and a Community of Practice model on college staff who work with students with disabilities on internships, employment opportunities, and post-graduation employment.

In this study, we will:

- Run a professional development intervention with three groups, training a total of 50 participants.
- Provide each participant with online training that includes evidence-based strategies for helping students with disabilities find jobs, building on lessons from our previous study.

- Randomly place participants in one of two groups—one that gets a year of additional technical assistance and one that does not—so we can test the impact of the technical assistance.
- Place those in the technical assistance group in a Community of Practice, where they will receive advice and collaborate to better support students in finding employment.
- Follow up with participants to see if the students they support have successfully secured paid employment opportunities as a result of the intervention they received.
- Finalize the professional development training and make it publicly available on our website for colleges nationwide after the three groups are completed.

Research Questions

1. What is the effect of the online training and Community of Practice on the ability of college personnel to provide career development activities, paid employment, and/or paid internship opportunities for their students with disabilities?
2. What is the effect of the online training and Community of Practice on the employment outcomes for students with disabilities postgraduation?

Importance of the Study

Many college students with disabilities face barriers to gaining work experience during school, which can affect their job opportunities after graduation. In 2019–2020, students with disabilities made up about 32% of the college population (NCES, 2023). While college students with disabilities bring valuable skills and perspectives, they often face challenges in finding full-time jobs, earning equal pay, building savings, or buying a home compared to their non-disabled peers (BLS, 2024; NCES, 2023; Phillips et al., 2022). Creating more work opportunities and support during college can help change this and open up pathways to long-term success.

Paid employment and internships are an important part of preparing for a career. For students with disabilities, these experiences help build confidence, expand their networks, strengthen self-advocacy, and lead to better job outcomes after college. In fact, students who have paid work or internships during college are more likely to be employed after graduation (Avellone et al., 2023; Domin et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2023; Whittenberg et al., 2023). The previous RRTC study that this study is built on found that after the intervention, all college locations nearly doubled their paid work experiences.

Our study is important because it will help universities better support students with disabilities as they move from college to careers, leading to improved competitive integrated employment outcomes. When university staff have the right tools and training, they can better connect students to accessible career opportunities that match their goals and strengths. This study highlights the importance of tailored interventions in promoting employment opportunities for students with disabilities in higher education.

Learn More

To learn more about this study or the other studies conducted under VCU's RRTC on Employment of Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities, visit transition.vcurrtec.org.

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