



Toward Culturally Responsive Support and Integrated Services: Steps to an Intervention Model for Indigenous Youth

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 3.

This project focuses on the experiences of Native youth with disabilities as they journey from high school to college, employment, and adult life. We will work together with Native youth, families, educators, Tribal leadership, Elders, and community members in four states. Activities will be conducted to learn more about what is working best for Native youth and what is needed to make services better. The study will result in a universal Indigenous approach to transition that can be adapted for each Tribal culture and community. The aim is to increase graduation rates, decrease dropouts, and improve college and employment outcomes.

Study Overview

Our study will research the journey to adulthood as well as employment outcomes for Native youth with disabilities.

In this study, we will:

- Partner with four schools serving Native youth and four site liaisons in four states.
- Gather information from Tribal members and stakeholders through interviews, storytelling, Talking Circles, focus groups, and community events.
- Modify the Culturally Responsive Support and Integrated Services (CRSIS) approach and measures of thriving.

- Implement CRSIS in eight schools with 80 Native youth with disabilities.
- Collect and analyze school performance, outcome, and satisfaction data from participants.
- Develop and share the CRSIS curriculum, resource guide, toolkit, youth-led leadership modules, and practice briefs.

Research Questions

1. What are the practices, needs, and preferences of Native students, families, educators, and community leaders for the successful transition of youth with disabilities from school to adult life?
2. What are the key factors that facilitate or impede successful collaboration and partnerships?
3. What are the most important elements that members of the Native American community want included in the Culturally Responsive Support and Integrated Services (CRSIS) framework?
4. What are the indicators of a student and family's well-being and flourishing that Native informants recommend be included in a flourishing index (FI)?
5. What is the effect of the CRSIS model on participating schools' Indicator data?
6. To what extent does CRSIS implementation result in differences in student FI results?
7. What changes are seen in the aggregated results of the students' interview sessions?

Importance of the Study

Every Tribal Nation and Indigenous community has its own traditions, beliefs, and virtues. Weaving people together through connection, sharing, family structure, and support are important in Indigenous cultures. Current education and service models often neglect Native cultural views and do not honor the sovereignty of Tribal Nations in their design or practice (Birdsell, 2014; National Indian Education Listening Session, 2024). This neglect leads to high dropout rates, unemployment, poverty, and suicide among Native youth with disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024a; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

A larger share of Indigenous students receive services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) than any other racial/ethnic group. Native youth with disabilities are among the most underserved and neglected populations in the nation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024b; National Council on Disability, 2023).

They face inequalities in vocational rehabilitation services and employment outcomes compared to whites (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2023; Shaewitz & Yin, 2021). Additionally, research on the transition of Native youth with disabilities is lacking. As such, wraparound services that include Native cultural resilience factors are a priority (The Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Committee on Native Children, 2024).

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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