

Research Brief

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Evaluating the Effects of the Career Network Intervention on Career Development Activities and CIE Outcomes of Students with IDD: Focus Group Results

Community and technical colleges are uniquely positioned to support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Their wide range of degree, certificate, and licensure programs, affordability, flexibility, and connections to local industries all contribute to an accessible pathway to higher education. Vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies are also highly connected within their communities. Their counselors serve as case managers for clients and provide important services such as job development, vocational skills training, and job coaching. While both of these entities focus on paid employment for their consumers, an intentional partnership between community and technical college staff and vocational rehabilitation professionals could further improve employment-related outcomes for students with IDD.

Research Study 4 from VCU's RRTC on Employment of Persons with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities is examining a technical assistance and training model for community and technical colleges and VR counselors to build a stronger career network to support students with IDD. The first phase of the study was focus groups to learn more about stakeholders' experiences with internships, employment, and working together.

■ Study Overview

During phase one, we spoke with 41 participants from 20 states in a series of virtual focus groups held in Spring 2025. These focus groups consisted of three types of participants:

1. community or technical college staff,
2. vocational rehabilitation professionals, and
3. current students or alumni of community or technical colleges who self-identify as having an intellectual or developmental disability.

During the focus groups, participants were asked a series of questions to elicit their insights and experiences on finding and maintaining paid employment or internships for students with IDD while in school, as well as any barriers or facilitators to successful employment.

In this brief, we present an overview of themes gathered from the focus group participants. The information provided by these participants was used to create an online training course on the topics perceived as most important, which was delivered in "Phase 2" of the same project.

Focus Group Themes

1. Inter-Department/Agency Relationships
 - Both college and VR staff members emphasized the importance of collaborative relationships across departments and agencies - calling it "key" to student success.
 - Several participants expressed a want for stronger relationships between college and VR staff, as well as with local business partners.
2. Roles
 - College staff report providing direct support to students in preparation for the workforce (e.g., job shadowing opportunities, help with job search).

- Vocational rehabilitation professionals listed their direct roles as working on vocational skills training, work evaluations, and transition services. They report taking a support role in goal-setting, education, networking, and financial support.
3. Support Services
 - Ensuring accommodations and services were student-specific was a significant theme across groups.
 - Students report widely using support services, and listed mentors as especially important influences.
 4. Accommodations
 - Students reported that their experience with accommodations focused widely on academics, and that many did not have experience or knowledge of accommodation options in the workplace.
 - College staff reports that the majority of supports offered to students were in the form of accommodations and direct teaching opportunities.
 5. Job Searches and Networking
 - Students indicated that their support services helped with job development activities (e.g., resumes, interview practice), and that networking was an important skill learned in college.
 6. Work-Based Learning
 - Work-based learning activities, such as paid internships and job shadowing, were broadly listed as being significant facilitators to paid employment for students with IDD.
 7. Concerns and Needs
 - Several groups reported that one challenge to finding paid employment is that working with students with disabilities means going outside of the “traditional” ways of finding or developing job opportunities. For example, a student with IDD may face attitudinal barriers, or the job hunt may take significantly longer, with less successful outcomes.
 - Barriers reported by college staff included a lack of training, funding, and resources, as well as staffing issues, including turnover.
 - College and VR staff report that helping students develop more realistic goal-setting, outcomes, and expectations can be challenging, especially for students with limited exposure to career fields prior to college.

Findings from these focus groups were synthesized into five modules for an online course that was delivered to a cohort of research participants in Summer 2026. Important topics included creating and managing an interdisciplinary support team, keeping the process student-centered, and developing and leveraging employer partnerships and community resources. The participants included community and technical college staff and VR professionals, who were recruited in small groups in order to facilitate a Career Network Intervention to support students with IDD. Findings from this cohort will be released in 2027.

■ Learn More <https://idd.vcurrctc.org/research/rs4.cfm>

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