

Effects of a Paid Internship Model on Postschool Outcomes of At-risk Youth with Disabilities

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Abstract

Background: Employment rates of individuals with disabilities are consistently below those without. Keeping students with disabilities on track to earn a regular diploma, and gain career preparation and paid work experiences can improve their outcomes. Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), awarded a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), established a Rehabilitation and Research Training Center (RRTC) focused on employment for transition-age youth with disabilities. One study examined the benefits of the Start on Success paid internship model for at-risk students with disabilities.

Objective: To investigate whether the SOS internship model, comprising a career and technical education course followed by a paid internship, improves postschool outcomes for students with disabilities who earned a regular diploma.

Methods: This quantitative, quasi-experimental design study compared the postschool outcomes of students with disabilities who participated in the SOS program with those who received standard transition services. Seniors took a CTE course in the fall and a paid internship in the spring. Both groups took the Transition Assessment Goal Generator (TAGG) at the start and end of their senior year, and Indicator #14 data were analyzed for both groups.

Results: The results revealed that students in the SOS model showed significant improvements in self-determination and were more likely to pursue postsecondary education, training, or employment compared to their peers who did not participate.

Conclusion: The study underscores the benefits of combining structured career and technical education with real-world experience to enhance postschool outcomes for students with disabilities. The authors recommend further research involving families and community partners in transition planning to prepare these students for their future goals better.

Keywords

paid internships, transition planning, postschool outcomes, students with disabilities

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Introduction

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) explored national programs to improve graduation rates of students with disabilities (SWD). The VDOE found that the Start on Success (SOS) program has been successful in many school divisions across the nation since its inception. SOS was founded in 1994 by the National Organization on Disability (NOD, 2023) as a model to provide early training and paid work experience for SWD. According to NOD, as this promising practice expanded to nationwide sites, the postsecondary education or employment outcomes increased to 75–85 percent. One qualitative study of the experiences of 20 SOS students (Sabbatino & Macrine, 2007) found substantial benefits for those participating in the program, including increased attendance, self-esteem and enhanced

commitment to work, knowledge of community-based academics and economics, and self-determination. Community partners also benefited from increased awareness and appreciation of SWD's capabilities.

In 2013, a state SOS Advisory Board led by VDOE and Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Center on Transition Innovations (CTI) received applications from

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Table 1. Four Primary Components of the SOS Model.

Component	Description
Interagency collaboration	involves a lead SOS coordinator and SOS teacher (Special Education), school district administrator, and vocational rehabilitation (VR) who meet for an hour once per month for six months during the planning period, as well as for the next 11 months during the implementation period.
CTE course	taught across sites for the first semester of the student's senior year. The course provides opportunities for job exploration, postsecondary education counseling, workplace readiness training, and self-advocacy.
Paid internship	in a community business occurs over 16 weeks (2 nd semester) for 15 h per week (240 h total), with an additional workshop held every two weeks (8 meetings) for three hours (24 h total) at the business. During the workshop, students reflect on work performance, identify their needs, and relate their internship experiences to material previously learned in the course.
Mentorship	sessions occur regularly, with a business mentor providing weekly assessment feedback and guidance to students regarding their work performance. The student meets with the business mentor for 1 h daily, 5 days a week, throughout the internship. Students can use this opportunity to practice self-determination skills by advocating for support needs and setting goals. Mentors can provide students with concrete opportunities to gain references and real work experiences.

Table 2. Benefits of the Components of the SOS Model.

SOS Component	Benefits of Components
Interagency collaboration	Local education agency and state agency coordination and collaboration are essential to providing meaningful transition services designed for a seamless transition of SWD from school to postschool activities that lead to competitive integrated employment (USDOE, 2020).
CTE course	Provides classroom experience to prepare them for their internships. Students with high-incidence disabilities benefit from career and technical education instruction. (Davis et al., 2016)).
Paid internship	Provides added value to the SOS program. The benefits of paid work experience before graduation increasingly suggest Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) post-graduation (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Wehman et al., 2014). In addition to the CTE course, Mazzotti et al. (2021) also cite a strong association between work experience and employment for these students.
Mentorship	Mentors are employees in the business assigned to serve in this role. One critical factor in keeping at-risk students in school is keeping them engaged and motivated (Kortering & Christenson, 2009; Krane & Klevan, 2019; McDermott et al., 2019; Murray & Pianta, 2007).

several school divisions across Virginia to become the first SOS pilot site in the state. Virginia piloted the SOS model in 2014 and since has successfully implemented this model in rural, urban, and suburban communities. Former student participants in Virginia had positive program outcomes, such as being engaged in either postsecondary employment or education and training following graduation from high school.

Virginia's SOS model incorporates a Career and Technical Education (CTE) course followed by paid work experience for at-risk youth with disabilities before exiting school. This model has four primary components across two semesters for SWD on track to earn a regular diploma. The four primary components are described in the Table 1 below.

The research supporting the benefits of the core components of SOS is included in the following Table 2.

One important way to engage students is to show how academics are linked to future outcomes. A review of mentorship programs (Lindsay et al., 2016) concluded quality programs had mentors acting as role models, offering advice, and providing social/emotional support.

This brief overview demonstrates a growing body of literature addressing the needs of at-risk SWD to graduate and transition into employment or postsecondary education. However, this review also exhibits a lack of evidence-based practices and outdated research focused on how to keep SWD in school and on track to complete a regular diploma (Bear et al., 2006; Karpinski et al., 1999; Kortering & Christenson, 2009; McDermott et al., 2019). The failure to graduate high school can have long-lasting impacts on any individual; however, it can be tenfold for SWD (Kortering & Christenson, 2009). The employment rates of individuals with disabilities are consistently below that of their peers without disabilities (BLS, 2024). Keeping SWD on track to earn a regular diploma can mitigate these poor outcomes (Lindsay et al., 2016).

Methods

VCU's Center on Transition Innovations (VCU CTI) has coordinated and overseen the SOS program in Virginia for over ten years, with positive anecdotal results. Each

year, school districts compete to have the support of VCU CTI in developing their SOS program and collaboration and funding from VR to pilot it. These districts continue to offer and sustain the program after support has ended. Because of this, the staff at the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) on Employment of Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities decided to conduct formal research to examine the SOS model as an evidence-based practice. The objective of the study is to evaluate the impact of the model's core components of interagency collaboration, CTE courses, paid internships, and business mentors on the postschool outcomes of at-risk high school seniors with an IEP who earn a regular diploma. This study was originally implemented as a randomized controlled trial (RCT), with students in the SOS program comprising the experimental group, compared to students in the business-as-usual group (i.e., those students receiving typical transition services).

Recruitment

Two school districts implementing the SOS model for several years were invited to participate in the study. Additionally, three districts were selected based on their experience implementing school-to-work programs and their interest in implementing the SOS model. Recruitment focused on students who typify at-risk factors such as, but not limited to low attendance, failing grades, low socioeconomic status, non-English speaking homes, and social isolation (Bowers et al., 2013; McDermott et al., 2019). The objective of the study was to recruit a minimum of 20 students from each school district, and randomly assign ten students to the experimental group and ten to the control group. This number was chosen because the school systems and their community partners had the capacity for ten students in the SOS program each year.

Once identified, students and families were invited to attend information sessions about the SOS program and the study's goals including the responsibilities of teachers, students, and families. School personnel and study staff reviewed the SOS model, the purpose of the study, and the process for collecting consent to participate. These sessions were offered in person and virtually. Students were given SOS program applications and instructed to complete and submit them before the deadline. School staff reviewed the applications for accuracy and completeness to ensure students met the eligibility requirements.

Students who completed their applications were contacted for an interview with school staff and VR counselors. Before the interviews, students and families consented and/or assented to participate in the study. The interview panel determined which students would be good candidates for SOS based on interviews and applications. Once interviews

were completed, a list of potential SOS students was developed, and the school district notified the study staff.

Due to the first year of recruitment coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic, the participating schools were not able to identify 20 students in their district, resulting in the decision to convert the study to a quasi-experimental design. All students who applied and met the requirements were able to participate in the experimental group. School districts then identified comparable students to be in the comparison group. School staff examined the demographics of the potential comparison group students in addition to the original study criteria of being a rising senior with an IEP pursuing a regular or advanced studies diploma, with limited work experience and no specific career pathway. The other demographics were matches on race, standardized test scores, diploma type, and attendance rate. Study staff met with those students to review the study and complete the consent or assent process. This same process was used in years two and three of the study when fewer than 10 students applied to the SOS program. However, study staff were able to randomly assign students to groups for more than 50% of the time.

Data Collection and Analysis

Students for the comparison and experimental groups each year: (1) have completed their junior year of high school; (2) are a SWD on an IEP (no limits on a specific disability); (3) are on track to earn a regular diploma; and (4) have an interest in working and increasing their employability skills, but with little to no prior paid employment. Paid employment is defined as individuals 16 years of age and over who did any work at all as paid employees (BLS, 2024). Students who met the recruitment criteria and consented to participate were enrolled in the study, with a maximum of 10 in the experimental group and an equal number of students with the same demographics in the comparison (business-as-usual – traditional transition services) group. Student demographics of both groups were recorded. Prior to any treatment for the intervention group, the Transition Assessment Goal Generator (TAGG) (Martin et al., 2015) was administered at the beginning of the fall semester to students in both groups (a description of the TAGG is included below). The TAGG was administered again at the end of the student's senior year for comparison. Outcome data were collected at the end of the senior year, as well as one year post-graduation. For the TAGG, data analysis included *t*-tests with a measure of magnitude (Cohen's *d*) (Cohen, 1988), while outcome data analysis included an examination of descriptive statistics.

The study team collected data throughout the school year. At the beginning of the SOS study, the TAGG (Martin et al., 2015) for each student's triad in both the experimental and comparison groups was administered.

The student's triad was defined as the student, a family member, and the student's case manager. At the end of the school year, the TAGG was administered again to test the effectiveness of the SOS program on the student's growth and improvement with transition goals compared to students in the comparison group. After the first year, the study team decided to collect the TAGG from the students only - it was not feasible to collect data from parents and case managers. Finally, data on student outcomes at graduation and 12 months post-graduation were collected and reviewed for all students in the study.

The TAGG (Martin et al., 2015) can be administered online or on paper, based on the preferences of the student and teacher. The TAGG is also offered in multiple languages, and one district used the Spanish version for several students. If completed online, students received an email from program staff with a link to the TAGG that was unique to them. Students were instructed that they could skip any items that they did not want to answer. The TAGG was developed specifically for SWD, takes approximately 10 min to complete, and assesses students' needs, strengths, and preferences for transition planning. It includes the following constructs:

- Strengths and limits and support community
- Disability awareness
- Persistence
- Interacting with others
- Goal setting and attainment
- Employment
- Student involvement in IEP

Study staff also collected follow-up data on students at graduation and one year post-graduation. The post-graduate outcomes survey was administered via SurveyMonkey at the end of the student's senior year and one year after graduation. The case manager/special education teacher or school personnel completed the information on the student. The Virginia State Testing Identifier, or STI number, was utilized to collect information. Follow-up data collection typically includes students who have actively engaged in the SOS model, while it is not generally carried out for students who have not participated in the model. Nevertheless, students who willingly consented to be a part of the comparison group for this study granted permission to the study staff for the collection of these data.

The data collected were similar to Indicator #14 data, which are routinely collected on all SWD, regardless of SOS participation. Indicator #14 data collection is a federally mandated follow-up survey that all school divisions complete on SWD who are one-year post-high school. The VDOE has contracted with the VCU RRTC CTI staff for 10 years to help collect these data and has agreed to its use in the study. Virginia typically has a 60 to 65 percent response rate on Indicator #14 data collection.

Because of this, the survey for this study was modeled after the Indicator #14 survey. This allowed study staff to have a higher chance of being able to gather data on most participants one year later, to compare whether or not student plans matched what they actually did (i.e., work, military, postsecondary, etc.). Additionally, one school system did not allow the use of STI numbers, but staff were still able to obtain the relevant data because of the study survey.

The dependent variables in question are activities after high school (enrolled in postsecondary education or employed, collected at graduation and 12 months post-graduation); Indicator 14 data (whether or not they are enrolled in higher education, a postsecondary training program, or competitively employed); and TAGG results (collected at the beginning of their senior year and graduation). The efficacy of the intervention was analyzed by comparing the differences in these variables between the experimental group and the comparison group.

Results

For Research Question 1 - What are the differences in activities one year beyond high school (postsecondary ed & employment) between students participating in the SOS model as compared to students in traditional transition services, as evidenced by Indicator #14 data? - study staff have been able to examine data for three of the four cohorts. Because data are collected one year post-graduation, data for the final cohort will be collected in the summer of 2025. Data are available for graduates from 2021, 2022, and 2023. This research question focuses on what happens one year after the students graduate, which is the Indicator #14 data. These data are required to be collected as mandated by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) (Part B SPP/APR Related Requirements, 2012). Each school system contacts students one year after exiting high school to collect these data. Data collected for this required Indicator include: is the former student in post-secondary education, employed, or is the student doing both? We had permission to examine Indicator #14 data for both the experimental and control groups.

The researchers were able to examine data from 88 participants (55 in the experimental group and 33 in the comparison group). The data collected show that the experimental group is either employed and/or enrolled in postsecondary education at a rate of 72%. On the other hand, the comparison group is employed and/or enrolled in postsecondary education at a rate of 50%. Findings indicate that the comparison group does not necessarily keep in touch with the schools or maintain a relationship one year after graduation. However, both groups have positive outcomes at a higher rate than the national average for SWD that we stated above (37%).

For Research Question 2 - What are the differences in career development awareness and transition planning of students participating in the SOS model as compared to students in traditional transition services, as evidenced on the Transition Assessment and Goal Generator (TAGG)? - the data revealed some differences here, as well. The TAGG was created by researchers in the Zarrow Center at the University of Oklahoma. After rigorous development, based on background research, validity, and reliability, the developers settled on the seven constructs for all three versions – student, family, and professional (Martin et al., 2015). The TAGG data are housed in the Zarrow Center database, which generates reports to use in the students' IEP meetings for goal setting purposes. Results from each student TAGG are compiled in the report because each person observes different skills of the student.

The original plans for this study were to use the TAGG as a pre-and post-test administered at the beginning and end of each student's senior year. The pre-test would be used as the baseline for both the experimental and comparison groups. Because of the issues with obtaining results from the family and professional, study staff decided to only use the student version. Our research question focuses on the differences between the experimental and comparison groups; however, the differences in the pre-and post-tests for the experimental group were also examined to determine any growth that occurred over the year. Again, results are from participating students who graduated in the spring of 2021, 2022, and 2023. The TAGG results with the addition of the 2024 graduates are being analyzed at the time of writing this article.

For the analysis, the responses were averaged so that the students had an overall score for each construct. For example, the TAGG has four items that make up the Disability Awareness construct. Those four items were combined so that each student has a Disability Awareness score, which is what was used for analysis. Staff conducted an independent samples *t*-test for each construct, as well as calculated a measure of magnitude, Cohen's *d* (Cohen, 1988). In examining the pre- and post-tests for the experimental group only, significant differences emerged from fall to spring in the Student Involvement in the IEP construct ($p = .039$) and Goal Setting and Attainment ($p = .020$). The Cohen's *d* statistic for Student Involvement in the IEP ($d = .627$) indicates a large effect, while the Cohen's *d* for Goal Setting and Attainment ($d = .288$) approaches a medium effect. Additionally, increases were found from fall to spring for each construct, and the measure of magnitude for each construct indicated medium to large effects.

After examining differences between the experimental and control groups, findings indicate no significant differences at baseline, indicating similarity between the two groups. Looking at the experimental group, those students increased in every single construct here from fall to spring. They had significant increases in Disability Awareness,

Interacting with Others, and Student Involvement in the IEP. Looking at the comparison group – the comparison group did have some increases, and they did have a significant increase with Student Involvement in the IEP; however, their increases in the other constructs were small, and in fact, they decreased in Persistence and Goal Setting and Attainment from fall to spring.

Discussion

The implementation of the SOS program by VCU's CTI has yielded promising anecdotal results over the past decade, with the research completed by the VCU RRTC on Transition supporting those positive results. The program's emphasis on interagency collaboration, CTE courses, paid internships, and business mentorship aims to improve post-school outcomes for at-risk high school seniors with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The initial approach of a RCT shifted to a quasi-experimental design due to recruitment challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this change, the study has continued to provide valuable insights.

Key Findings

Key findings emerged with postsecondary outcomes, in particular with employment and education. Data from Indicator #14 show a higher rate of employment and postsecondary education for SOS participants (72%) compared to the control group (50%). Both groups outperform the national average for SWD (37%). This indicates the effectiveness of the SOS program in facilitating better postsecondary outcomes.

Additionally, other findings emerged with the TAGG administration, for career development and transition planning. The TAGG results demonstrated significant improvements for SOS participants in constructs such as Student Involvement in the IEP and Goal Setting and Attainment. The experimental group showed medium to large effect sizes across various constructs, indicating substantial growth. In contrast, the control group exhibited minimal gains and even some declines, particularly in Persistence and Goal Setting and Attainment.

Limitations

Despite the encouraging results, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- **Study design shift from RCT to quasi-experimental:** The shift from a RCT to a quasi-experimental design due to recruitment issues during the pandemic introduces potential biases. The non-random assignment of students to the experimental and comparison

groups may affect the internal validity of the findings, as well as the fact that students in the experimental group applied to be in the program, while those in the comparison group did not always apply for SOS.

- **Recruitment challenges with sample size and selection:** The study initially aimed to recruit 20 students from each district but faced difficulties, especially during the pandemic. The smaller sample sizes and the inability to recruit the intended number of students might limit the generalizability of the results.
- **Data collection variability with the TAGG:** While the TAGG was administered both online and on paper, the varying modes of administration and the use of different language versions could introduce inconsistencies in the data. Additionally, the initial plan to include family and professional assessments had to be abandoned, which may have provided a more comprehensive understanding of student progress.
- **Longitudinal data constraints with follow-up:** Collecting follow-up data, particularly one year post-graduation, poses challenges in maintaining contact with participants, especially those in the control group who may not remain engaged with the school system. This could result in incomplete data and affect the accuracy of postsecondary outcome measurements.

Conclusion

The five-year study examined the impact of the SOS internship model on the postsecondary outcomes of at-risk SWD who earned a regular diploma. The researchers hypothesized that students who completed a CTE course followed by a paid internship would achieve better outcomes compared to their peers who did not engage in this model. Despite the obstacles presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the research team, along with their partners and participants, successfully implemented the model with fidelity. However, the TAGG assessment process encountered difficulties, as it did not include input from school staff or families as initially planned, due to issues obtaining their results. The study's findings indicated that students involved in the SOS model demonstrated significant improvements in self-determination skills and were more likely to pursue postsecondary education, training, or employment compared to their peers who did not participate in the model. The results suggest that paid internship models like SOS positively impact the postsecondary outcomes for SWD. To further enhance student outcomes, the authors recommend additional research to identify effective strategies for involving families and community partners in

transition planning, with the goal of better preparing SWD for their postsecondary goals.

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Statements and Declarations

Ethics Statement

The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Virginia Commonwealth University, #HM20017978.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in this study.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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