

Guest Editorial

Evidence-based Best Practices in the Public Vocational Rehabilitation Program that Lead to Employment Outcomes

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Abstract. An introduction and overview of the Special Issue on Evidence-based Best Practices in the Public Vocational Rehabilitation Program that Lead to Employment Outcomes is provided and briefly discussed.

Keywords: Evidence-based practice, vocational rehabilitation, employment outcomes, disability

According to recent estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 56.7 million people (18.7%) of the civilian non-institutionalized population had a disability in 2010 (Brault, 2012). However, less than half of the people with disability aged 21 to 64 (41%) were employed at the time of the interview, which is a striking disparity given that nearly 80% of people in this age group without disabilities were employed (Brault, 2012). There is no question that the financial crisis of 2007–2008 had a disproportionate impact on workers with disabilities, with the number of employed workers with disabilities declining at a rate more than three times that of workers without disabilities (Kaye, 2010), and the unemployment rate is significantly higher than the rate for workers without disabilities (BLS, 2010). Research has indicated that unemployed individuals are vulnerable to a higher prevalence of depression and anxiety disorders, use alcohol more frequently,

and report lower levels of self-esteem than people who are employed (Dutta, Gerve, Chan, Chou, & Ditchman, 2008). Without a doubt, lack of employment opportunities excludes people with disabilities from full community inclusion and participation, significantly affecting their quality of life. As such, participation in competitive employment and other meaningful work activities is considered a fundamental human right and crucial to the physical and psychological well-being of people with disabilities (Dutta et al., 2008).

The state-federal vocational rehabilitation (VR) program, which serves approximately 1,000,000 individuals a year and spends approximately \$3 billion annually, plays a large and instrumental role in helping persons with disabilities achieve their independent living and employment goals (Dean, Pepper, Schmidt, & Stern, 2013; Dutta et al., 2008; Martin, West-Evans, & Connelly, 2010; U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2005). Dutta et al. (2008) examined cases that were closed as either rehabilitated or not rehabilitated by state VR agencies in the Fiscal Year 2005 and found that 62% of the individuals with disabilities

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were employed after receiving services. Cost-benefit analysis models of service provision and labor market outcomes also demonstrate that VR services have positive long-term labor market outcome effects that substantially exceed the cost of providing services. For example, Dean et al. (2013) analyzed data of individuals with cognitive impairments who applied for VR services in the state of Virginia in State Fiscal Years 1988 and 2000 and found VR services have substantial positive returns, with average benefits ranging from \$10,979 for the short run to \$21,175 for the long run, while mean costs range from \$3,632 to \$5,832. They concluded that using even the most conservative assumptions for non-purchased services costs, the long-run mean benefit is estimated to exceed cost by a factor of 3.6.

Although state-federal VR program has been relatively successful in helping people with disabilities obtain and maintain employment, this federal disability program is facing some formidable challenges. For example, the average hourly earnings of all VR customers in competitive employment are only 52% of the general workforce (Rehabilitation Services Administration [RSA], 2008). Minorities receive only 80% of the services provided to European American customers. The employment rate of about 60% after receiving VR services has not changed significantly for several decades. According to the GAO (2005), employment, earnings, and the amount of purchased services received while in the VR program varied significantly by the consumer's disability types and other individual characteristics. In addition, state VR agencies varied substantially in the employment rates achieved, the characteristics of individuals served, frequency of providing services, and case expenditures. The U.S. Office of Management and Budget and Federal agencies (2006) gave the state-federal VR program an adequate performance rating, indicating a strong need for the agency to (a) set more ambitious goals, (b) achieve better results, (c) improve accountability, and (d) strengthen its management practices. Similarly, GAO (2003) indicated the state-federal VR program among other federal disability programs need to keep abreast with scientific advances, and economic and social changes. In this era of empowerment, accountability, and constrained budgets, state VR agencies must be proactive and re-invent themselves to provide effective and efficient services that will improve employment outcomes of persons with disabilities.

In recent years there has been a significant amount of interest and movement towards the concepts of evidenced-based practice and knowledge translation

efforts within healthcare, disability and related practice settings. These initiatives have focused attention on the use of findings obtained through systematic research efforts to inform practice and clinical decision making for individual practitioners, and to inform policy and continuous improvement strategies for organizations that serve people with disabilities (Leahy & Arokiasamy, 2010). Clearly, the emphasis in the future will be on the meaning of research findings to practitioners and consumers in improving services, interventions, and employment outcomes for persons with disabilities, and translating and disseminating evidence-based practices (EBP) that come from research efforts to the level of the organization that will affect and inform practice and policy (Leahy, Thielsen, Millington, Austin & Fleming, 2009).

In fiscal year 2010, we received a five-year grant from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) to establish a national rehabilitation research and training center (RRTC-EBP VR) to conduct evidence-based practice research that will improve the effectiveness of VR service delivery practices. The RRTC was a partnership among researchers and trainers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, University of Wisconsin-Stout, Michigan State University, University of Texas at El Paso, Southern University-Baton Rouge, and the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR). One of the mandates of the RRTC was to conduct a qualitative study of state VR agencies using a case study approach, to provide a comprehensive analysis of the policies, procedures, practices and structural elements related to the provision of innovative services to consumers that lead to successful employment outcomes. This special issue represents the considerable efforts we have expended to conduct a comprehensive multiple case study of state VR agencies that span a three-year period under the leadership of Professor Michael J. Leahy at Michigan State University. Collectively, this case study and the survey we used to investigate evidence-based practice represented the perspectives of 29 leaders and administrators, 56 mid-level managers and 469 counselors in four state VR agencies (Leahy et al., 2013). We would like to thank the state directors from Texas, Utah, Mississippi, and Maryland for their complete support of this research project. The researchers found the leadership, mid-management personnel, and rehabilitation counselors interviewed to be very open and candid in their responses to the inquiries regarding best practices in their respective state. They were also willing to share documents and other materials the researchers

requested and were interested in the observations made during data collection regarding best practices and how they could improve outcomes within their own states.

This special issue comprises six articles. In designing this special issue we have given a great deal of thought to challenges facing state VR agencies and have selected a group of highly respected and skilled scholars from our RRTC research team to address these topics comprehensively for an informed and scholarly discussion, in order to extend the national dialog on evidenced-based practice research and knowledge translation to the public vocational rehabilitation program. Specifically, Anderson, Leahy, Del Valle, Sherman and Tansey (2014) provided an introduction to the use of the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methodology (Hill, 2011) as a method of choice for analyzing focus group and interview data in our multiple case studies with state VR agencies. Consensual qualitative research methodology incorporates elements from phenomenological, grounded theory, and comprehensive process analysis, and is one of the most frequently used qualitative inquiry approaches incorporated in counseling psychology research (Ponterotto, 2005). After reviewing the CQR research design and its essential components, Anderson et al. (2014) then explain the complex process of using CQR to identify best practices and organizational factors from narrative case study data obtained from the four state VR agencies included in the study.

Del Valle, Leahy, Sherman, Anderson, Tansey, and Schoen (2014) reported the results of their four-state multiple case study in terms of promising rehabilitation practices used by state VR agencies to improve employment outcomes of people with disabilities. Specifically, they found 29 promising organizational and service delivery practices that facilitate employment outcomes using the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) approach. This article also provides observations on the sustainability and portability of these practices, along with some limitations in terms of manualized intervention practices and data available regarding the effectiveness of these practices within the state agencies studied. In a related article, Sherman, Leahy, Del Valle, Anderson, Tansey and Lui (2014) identified promising organizational and cultural factors that appear to promote best practices in the public vocational rehabilitation program. This comprehensive examination revealed specific organizational practices, culture and structural elements that encourage and support the development of innovative and effective service delivery practices.

In the fourth article, Tansey, Bezyak, Chan, Leahy and Lui (2014) report on a study undertaken with the four selected VR agencies to determine the level of understanding VR counselors have regarding EBP with specific attention focused on perceived self-efficacy, outcome expectancy, barriers, and readiness to use evidence in current practice. Data were collected from 396 rehabilitation counselors and results indicate that self-efficacy and outcome expectancy were positively associated with readiness to use EBP, and agency barriers and personal barriers were negatively related to readiness to use EBP. In the fifth article, Lui, Anderson, Matthews, Nierenhausen and Schlegelmilch (2014) acknowledge the historical gap between research and practice in vocational rehabilitation (VR) and provide strategies for VR counselors to help bridge that gap, including the Knowledge-to-Action (KTA) framework that helps to overcome some of these barriers and facilitate counselors' abilities to acquire, apply, and share knowledge and evidence-based approaches. Finally, in the sixth article, Leahy, Chan, Lui, Rosenthal, Tansey, Wehman, Kundu, Dutta, Anderson, Del Valle, Sherman, and Menz (2014) provide a comprehensive analysis of evidence-based best practices in the public vocational rehabilitation program from the multiple case study that includes gaps, future directions and recommended steps to move forward.

In summary, we are pleased to introduce this special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* devoted to identify promising management and VR practices used by state VR agencies to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities. There is no question that moving forward on this developing front will be challenging, and will require a comprehensive, multifaceted, and systemic approach within the public vocational rehabilitation program. The articles submitted for this special issue have been prepared to provide readers with theoretical concepts, analytic strategies, and qualitative research findings on organizational and cultural factors that foster the use of innovative management practices and empirically supported VR service delivery practices to improve the employment outcomes of people with disabilities. The findings of these studies also provide recommendations for scale-up implementation of best management practices and evidence-based practices in state VR agencies. Future research directions are also identified on how to increase the choices of empirically supported VR interventions and services available to consumers and encourage agencies and their staff to embrace the use of evidence-based management and clinical practices. We

hope that *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* readers will find this special issue to be an important and useful resource, stimulating the next generation of evidence-based practice research in state VR agencies. We would like to thank all of our research team authors for their extensive contributions to this special issue. We would also like to thank NIDRR, the Rehabilitation Services Administration and CSAVR for their ongoing support and guidance. Finally, we would like to thank Paul Wehman, Editor of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* for providing the opportunity to present this special issue in a timely manner. His patience, support, and advice are deeply appreciated by the entire research team.

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