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Project SEARCH: Opening Doors to Employment for Young People with Disabilities¹

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Over the past few decades, community-based training and support models—including job coaching,² job carving,³ working with employers to develop job accommodations, and customized employment⁴—have begun to replace “sheltered workshop” employment for people with significant disabilities. However, typical school-to-work models for people with cognitive disabilities have not kept pace with these trends. Although they focus on community employment, typical approaches combine special education classes with simulated, enclave, or short-term community employment and often do not fully prepare the student for work or meet employer needs (Rutkowski et al. 2006).

One exception that has gained national attention is Project SEARCH. This unique work immersion model is designed to help students with significant disabilities transition from school to work, with a focus on the needs of both the student and potential employer. In this brief, we describe Project SEARCH and consider whether it represents an effective model for increasing employment among these individuals.

The Project SEARCH Model

In the mid-1990s, Cincinnati Children's Hospital began a broad diversity campaign to build a stable, reliable workforce that represented the surrounding community. Although medical professionals make up about 70 percent of the hospital's workforce, the remaining employees are support personnel who receive on-the-job training and tend to experience high turnover. As part of its diversity effort, the hospital formed a partnership with Great Oaks Career Campuses, a career technical school with a significant proportion of students (28 percent) with developmental disabilities (DD). The resulting job training and placement program was named Project SEARCH and focused on training high school students with DD who are making the transition from school to work. The Project SEARCH model is based on an active collaboration between the hospital, Great Oaks, and the Ohio Rehabilitation Services Commission, the state's vocational rehabilitation agency (SVRA) (Rutkowski et al. 2006). Over the past 15 years, this model has been implemented in 140 additional sites in the United States and the United Kingdom, mostly in hospitals, although some programs have been implemented in banks, insurance companies, state and local government agencies, zoos, senior care facilities, and universities.

Project SEARCH is unique in its total immersion of students in the workplace. Each Project SEARCH site generally enrolls 10 to 12 students per year. These students spend the entire school day at the workplace, beginning with a one-hour

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²Job coaching involves on-the-job training to help the employee perform work-related tasks, acquire interpersonal skills, travel to and from the job site, and learn other skills needed to maintain employment.

³Job carving involves combining duties from one or more existing jobs into a new position that best fits a person's abilities.

⁴Customized employment means individualizing the work relationship between employees and employers in ways that meet the needs of both. Employment is customized based on the employee's strengths, needs, and interests, and the process may involve job carving, self-employment, or other job development or restructuring strategies. The resulting job responsibilities are tailored to fit the strengths of the person with a disability and meet an employer's needs.

classroom session that teaches employment and independent living skills such as effective communication, goal setting, decision making, problem solving, nutrition, grooming, and independent travel. During the first few weeks, each student is assessed on memory, judgment, teamwork, job and interpersonal skills, and interests. The results are used to revise the curriculum and coordinate internships. During the second month, students progress to the first of three individualized worksite rotations or internships lasting 10 weeks, analogous to the clinical rotations of medical students. Project SEARCH staff identify internships that simulate real-world employment and teach competitive, marketable, transferable skills. Students must dress appropriately for the workplace; schedule their own job interviews; and communicate with supervisors about work issues, such as problems on the job, tardiness, or absence during their shift. Toward the end of their rotation, students give their two weeks' notice and participate in an exit interview with their supervisor.

Placement in a paid job can occur at any time during the program but generally takes place within the final month of the program or during the following summer. The student is often placed in one of the departments in the organization where he or she served as an intern; Cincinnati Children's Hospital has hired more than 100 Project SEARCH students since 1995. Project staff members work with students to explore other employment options if none of the internships leads to a permanent job. The goal for students is competitive employment in an integrated setting of their choosing, with fringe benefits and opportunities to advance. Students have obtained jobs in clinical sterilization, patient transport, medical lab work, materials management/stocking/inventory control, data entry, credit card verification, filing and mailroom work, landscaping, and maintenance, among many other areas. Long-term supports that enable Project SEARCH alumni to retain their jobs, such as job coaching, are available at the worksite for as long as necessary. These supports help employees to meet performance standards, obtain accommodations, and take on additional job responsibilities as their skills and aspirations grow. By ensuring competent job performance and low turnover, these supports also help employers retain a reliable, stable workforce.

Project SEARCH Eligibility

Project SEARCH targets students age 18 to 22 who have specific cognitive and/or physical disabilities such as Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injury, or autism. Only students with a strong desire for competitive employment are eligible. They must have an individualized education plan (IEP) and must have completed all academic gradu-

ation requirements, have deferred graduation status, or be in their last year of high school eligibility.⁵ Students also must:

- Be willing and able to access transportation (including paratransit) independently
- Have basic communication skills
- Demonstrate appropriate social, grooming, and hygiene behaviors
- Have independent toileting and feeding skills
- Pass drug screening and felony checks and have updated immunizations (required in hospitals)

Partnerships

As shown in Table 1, four primary partners are needed to implement the Project SEARCH model: a sponsoring employer, a school system, a community rehabilitation provider (CRP), and the SVRA and/or the state or local DD agency.⁶ Representatives from each partner organization generally meet regularly for eight months to a year to plan the program and develop formal agreements among the partners (Rutkowski et al. 2006). The employer should have a wide variety of jobs, ideally requiring on-the-job training, with complex but repetitive and systematic duties. The firm should be located near public transportation and have a cafeteria and a fitness facility. The employer provides a project liaison, helps to identify internships, supervises interns, and considers hiring the participants upon completion of their internships.

The school system provides an on-site instructor for each worksite, instructional materials, and job coaches in some cases. The CRP often provides short-term job coaching, under contract to the SVRA or DD agency. The SVRA enrolls students for services; develops individualized plans for employment (IPEs);⁷ and may fund short-term job coaching, assistive technology, or other supports. Finally, the DD agency funds long-term job coaching or other supports for individuals deemed eligible.

When funding from the above organizations is insufficient, sites have devised creative ways to obtain supplementary funding. For example, one site used Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG)⁸ funds to pay teachers during summer months, purchase classroom supplies and equipment, and pay for job coaching. Others have used Ticket to Work⁹ or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) work incentives, such as the Plan to Achieve Self Support,¹⁰ to fund long-term supports. Several sites initiated performance-based fee schedules with their SVRA based upon milestones such as program completion or job placement.

⁵ The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act allows students to defer graduation and receive services through the school district until age 22, providing the student with four additional years of education and transition services.

⁶ In the original Cincinnati Project SEARCH program, Great Oaks served as the school system and the CRP.

⁷ The IPE, required under the Rehabilitation Act, documents the client's goals, the steps necessary to reach those goals, and the services that the SVRA will provide.

⁸ MIGs are grants to states to develop policies and programs that support individuals with disabilities who work.

⁹ Ticket to Work provides a ticket that a beneficiary can use to obtain rehabilitation or other services to support employment.

¹⁰ The Plan to Achieve Self Support allows individuals receiving SSI to set aside earnings to meet employment goals without reducing the SSI benefit.

Table 1. Project SEARCH Roles and Resources

Entity	Project Roles	Staff and Resources
Employer	Provides a small classroom and a project liaison, mentors/supervises students, potentially hires students after the internship	Work supervisors, classroom space
School system	Recruits and assesses students; provides a special education instructor; teaches the curriculum; links students with community agencies; manages the program; arranges for accommodations and therapy, such as interpreters, occupational therapy, and training to travel to and from work	Project SEARCH instructor, special education supervisor
CRP	Provides job coaching during the internships, identifies and develops jobs for those not hired by the host business (funded by the SVRA or the state or local DD agency, depending on participant need and eligibility)	Job coach, resources for long-term employment
SVRA or DD agency	Determines eligibility for services; develops IPE; authorizes funds for job coaching; funds job development, often provided by a CRP	Funding for short- and long-term job supports, rehabilitation counselor

Technical Assistance, Budget, and Outcomes

Project SEARCH provides training and technical assistance (T/TA) to organizations that wish to sponsor Project SEARCH sites. T/TA includes tours of the hospital and other sites in Cincinnati, a three-day annual conference, on-site T/TA, an operations manual and other T/TA materials, and a model budget that sites can use to help plan their interventions.

According to the model budget, the annual costs for one site are \$233,280.¹¹ Personnel costs include one full-time instructor, three part-time (20 to 25 hours/week) job coaches, one part-time job developer to assist with permanent job placement during the second half of the year, and a long-term support manager, for a total of \$207,500. The remainder covers supplies and equipment, travel, marketing, staff development, and miscellaneous expenses. The budget includes 12 students (almost \$20,000 per student). Schools might incur some of these costs in serving these students, even if they have not implemented Project SEARCH. Not included in the budget are (1) the costs of employer supports, such as the Project SEARCH liaison, the classroom, and additional supervisory time for the interns, and (2) in-kind supports such as SVRA or DD agency staff time.

A national evaluation of Project SEARCH has not been conducted. Outcomes data are limited, but job placement statistics are available from project sites in Ohio. In 2008–2009, 152 students were enrolled in 18 sites in Ohio; 125 completed the program, and 72 (about 58 percent of program completers and about half of program enrollees) were placed into permanent jobs.¹² According to Project SEARCH staff, the number of placements was lower than in past years, primarily due to the downturn in the economy (personal communication with S. Rutkowski, November 21, 2009).

Discussion

Project SEARCH is unique among transition projects in its focus on the needs of both students with disabilities and

their employers. The Project SEARCH long-term support manager generally operates at the worksite and has an intimate knowledge of the company as well as a close relationship with the supervisor; this support manager is immediately available to solve ongoing problems. On-site job development and coaching promotes employment stability in positions with a history of high turnover and can help an employee adapt to job changes, adjust to changes in function, or create a career development ladder to prevent burnout or boredom (Habeck et al. 2007). Project SEARCH saves staff time for an employer by creating a single point of contact for employee recruitment and support, eliminating the need for the employer to interact with multiple community agencies and employee advocates.

Project SEARCH focuses on integrating classroom training with real work experience, quickly moving youth into jobs matched to their skills and interests. Rather than limiting students to simple, repetitive, low-skill jobs, Project SEARCH job developers seek to identify more complex jobs with routines that can be systematically taught. Students learn life skills associated with the work culture and can immediately test those skills through internships with the sponsoring employer. Vocational education in the workplace teaches students to address job-related issues as they arise. Students who perform well in the program develop strong work skills and are either offered a permanent job by the sponsoring employer or are given an employment reference. Previous research has shown that quickly moving youth into real jobs that are well-matched to their interests and have growth potential positively impacts job retention (Cook et al. 2005; Luecking and Fabian 2000).

Collaboration between *all* partners is necessary to make Project SEARCH successful. Each partner plays a critical role in providing and funding services. In many school-to-work transition programs, partners operate as disparate service systems, and coordinating services into a more holistic approach is often difficult (Luecking et al. 2004). However, the Project

¹¹ These costs are based upon a 2009 budget for a Project SEARCH program in Ohio. This budget is only a model; many Project SEARCH sites implement the program for less (personal communication with S. Rutkowski, November 21, 2009).

¹² The mean numbers of program entrants, completers, and placements are 8.4, 6.9, and 4.0, respectively.

SEARCH model integrates services to support successful work experiences. Gaining buy-in from all partners from the beginning ensures that all have a stake in the project's success and are motivated to work together. The model presents a refreshing alternative to the usual lack of service coordination for transition-age youth.

We do not know whether the outcomes of Project SEARCH are sufficient to justify the program's cost. Project SEARCH has not systematically collected cost and outcome data in the past, nor are cost and outcome data available for relevant alternatives. Data that are available indicate that Project SEARCH costs are high—more than \$20,000 per youth during the academic year, with additional costs for long-term supports. Only about half of Project SEARCH enrollees are successfully placed in long-term jobs, which means the costs per successful placement are about \$40,000 during the first academic year. We do not know the extent to which such costs are incurred by students in alternative programs or the extent to which similar students not enrolled in Project SEARCH find employment.¹³ To answer these questions, we suggest conducting a rigorous evaluation and cost-benefit analysis of Project SEARCH.

Several other issues warrant consideration. First, Project SEARCH focuses on a small number of students with cognitive disabilities who are carefully screened for program suitability. If Project SEARCH is to reach a broader population, its eligibility criteria might need to be relaxed somewhat, which could cause its placement rates to fall. Second, the intensive focus on a few students and the high per-youth costs might make broader replication impractical unless replication produced substantial savings for other public programs, such as disability benefit programs. Third, although the Project SEARCH model integrates youth with disabilities with other employees and attempts to match youth with jobs based upon their skills and interests, the model steers participants to only one employer for internships and potential jobs. Project sites must identify employers with a wide variety of jobs if they are to avoid channeling youth into jobs for which they have little interest or ability. Ideally, several Project SEARCH sites should operate in each community so that students have more internships and jobs to choose from, but the intensity and costs of the intervention might make this impractical in many communities.

Finally, the standards-driven education model, emphasized by No Child Left Behind and other legislation, has

created a focus on academic outcomes to the detriment of employment outcomes. This is problematic for students with severe disabilities. It is unclear how a life-skills curriculum and community-based work experience can coexist with standards of learning. Despite evidence that real-work experiences are essential to finding work and building careers, alternative opportunities might need to be created through project-based learning, youth employment programs, summer jobs programs, and other resources.

Despite these significant caveats, Project SEARCH presents a unique and promising approach to helping students with disabilities find and maintain long-term employment. A thorough evaluation and cost-benefit study would reveal whether Project SEARCH represents a substantial improvement in how society provides transition support for this population.

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¹³ Cincinnati Children's Hospital is attempting to design a data collection system for Project SEARCH sites and expects to have the system in place by fall 2010. Collecting data on alternatives for participants will remain challenging, however.

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