

# Researchers call for systemic changes to improve career prospects of young people with disabilities

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A deeper level and different kind of coordination, collaboration, and cooperation are needed to narrow the gap in employment opportunities between youth and young adults with and without disabilities. A collection of research articles in the latest special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* presents strategies to improve the transition from school to work for young people with disabilities.

The special issue, guest edited by US-based vocational rehabilitation experts Johnny W. Collett, Phillip D. Rumrill, Jr., Connie Sung, and Jian Li, acknowledges the progress that has been made in the last nearly 50 years, partially thanks to legislation in the US that facilitates increased educational and employment inclusion for people with disabilities. However, research shows that outcomes for [young people](#) with disabilities still lag far behind those for non-disabled youth.

The purpose of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is, in part, "to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes [special education](#) and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living."

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, is "designed to strengthen and improve our nation's public workforce system and help Americans with barriers to employment, including individuals with disabilities, into high quality careers and help employers hire and retain skilled workers."

"In theory, these laws, working together, should result in improved educational and employment outcomes for people with disabilities. The problem is that laws don't work together—people do. We need to think, plan, and work differently," according to Co-Guest Editor Johnny W. Collett, MAEd, University of Kentucky Human Development Institute, Lexington, KY, U.S., and former Assistant United States Education

Secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services.

"We need to reject contentment with the status quo and abandon our complacency. We need to pursue improvement, innovation, and change relentlessly. We need to demonstrate that we care more about preparing people than we do about preserving systems," adds Co-Guest Editor Jian Li, Ph.D., Kent State University, Kent, OH, U.S..

The most significant challenges to overcome for young people with disabilities are lack of on-the-job supports; negative employer and co-worker attitudes including discrimination, transportation, and technology issues; lack of provision of long-term supports for those with the most significant disabilities; and low expectations for young people with disabilities on the part of society at large.

"There are no shortcuts to improved educational and employment outcomes for people with disabilities or to the systemic improvements that are needed at every level to facilitate them," comments Co-Guest Editor Connie Sung, Ph.D., Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, U.S..

"Individuals and teams seeking to advance ideas for improvement and innovation will likely encounter systems that are, by their nature, built to resist change. All of this is particularly true within government settings and other bureaucratic systems. However, while real and sustainable change will almost certainly be harder and take longer, the investment of time and effort will ultimately produce more than any presumed shortcut ever could."

With the documented importance of career exploration and establishment activities in mind, the purpose of this special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* is to highlight current scholarship

regarding transition and individual supports in education and employment for youth and [young adults](#) with disabilities.

Each article in this issue, through the findings it presents and the implications it raises, helps to inform this important and ongoing conversation about how best to prepare young people with disabilities for the adult world.

"To improve societal inclusion of young people with disabilities and facilitate better education and employment opportunities, we recommend verification of evidence-based practices that focus on competitive, integrated employment, training and technical assistance to school personnel, employers, and rehabilitation professionals, and increased utilization of vocational rehabilitation services," recommends Co-Guest Editor Phillip D. Rumrill, Jr, Ph.D., CRC, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, U.S..

This collection of research papers in the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* highlights the following topics:

- Pre-Employment Transition Services in different US states
- The adolescent behavioral index
- Employer discrimination
- Job interviewing practices
- The Cognitive Skills Enhancement Program
- Helping young adults with specific learning disabilities
- Analysis of differences in race and ethnicity in Individual Placement Support services
- Barriers to employment for young adult central nervous system tumor survivors
- Autistic youth's self-reporting of job interview skills and job interview anxiety
- Transition and employment for youth with autism spectrum

disorder

In the first of these articles, lead investigator Aliza Lambert, Ph.D., CRC, Department of Psychiatric Rehabilitation and Counseling Professions, School of Health Professions, Rutgers University, Piscataway, NJ, U.S., and her co-authors present the findings of a study on the delivery of pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) to 14–16-year-old students with significant disabilities in Virginia and Kentucky by families/students, vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors, and educators.

Dr. Lambert explains: "Across all stakeholder groups in our study, participants stressed the importance of early career awareness and employment preparation skills for students with significant disabilities as critical for transition planning. Even though the benefits of early exposure were apparent, most participants reported that students aged 14–16 with significant disabilities had limited to no participation in Pre-ETS activities."

The results of the study contribute to a growing body of research on the implementation of Pre-ETS. The implementation of Pre-ETS, especially for younger students with disabilities, is important to better understand the unique needs of these students and how to effectively provide these services. Obtaining stakeholder perspectives from families/students, VR counselors, and educators provide important insights on the facilitators and challenges to providing Pre-ETS.

"The results of this research are timely as states and localities continue to create Pre-ETS opportunities for students with disabilities early on in their career awareness and employment preparation process," Dr. Lambert adds. "We are so thankful to the families, VR counselors, and educators who took time to talk with us and be a part of this important study. I hope the study and the results show that this work is very

important and that more work needs to be done that centralizes the lived experiences of individuals with significant disabilities."

Co-author Elizabeth Evans Getzel stresses that the need for early career planning and [employment](#) preparation for students with significant [disabilities](#) remains a critical issue because understanding the perspectives of various stakeholders on the delivery of Pre-ETS to engage younger students in the vocational rehabilitation process can offer insights on how to better serve them.

**More information:** Aliza Lambert et al, Perspectives on the implementation of pre-ETS services: Identification of barriers and facilitators to early career planning for youth with disabilities, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* (2023). [DOI: 10.3233/JVR-230001](https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-230001)

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