

Graduates of a Michigan school-to-work transitional program achieve high success in obtaining employment

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An intern of the Project SEARCH program at Michigan State University learning various employment skills that match the individual's career interest and goals. Credit: Michigan State University.

A [new study](#) published in the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* evaluates the employment outcomes and ongoing support needs among graduates of Project SEARCH in Michigan, a one-year school-to-work transitional program. Replicated at more than 500 sites across the United States and worldwide, the program prepares students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) to attain and maintain competitive employment upon graduation.

People with IDD face an [unemployment rate](#) of more than 300% higher than in the [general population](#), as well as frequent underemployment, limited hours, and lower wages. A collaboration among educational and vocational agencies, Project SEARCH provides vocational and soft skills training, coaching, and on-the-job internships to help individuals with IDD overcome the many challenges they encounter entering the world of employment.

While research has established the success of Project SEARCH in initial job placement, less is known about how the graduates fare long-term, or what they are experiencing throughout the transition from education to employment. This study takes a comprehensive look at post-graduation experience and outcomes.

Using both qualitative and [quantitative methods](#), the investigators asked Project SEARCH participants' parent caregivers how their graduates were doing on their jobs, how they felt about the job development and employment process, and whether they had ongoing support needs that were unmet after their involvement with Project SEARCH wound down.

Most respondents reported positive [employment outcomes](#), resulting in high job retention (>77%, 75% of them remained in the jobs they had secured post-graduation) and overall satisfaction with their employment. More than 83% used the skills learned through the program's classes and internship placements. As such, the study highlights the effectiveness of

students' prior work experience in predicting positive career prospects and post-school outcomes.

"We were glad to see the high rates of employment and retention for Project SEARCH graduates, much higher than the typical rate for people with IDD who have not participated in such a program," said co-lead investigator Connie Sung, Ph.D., CRC, LPC, Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology, & Special Education, The MSU Center for Services, Training, and Research for Independence and Desired Employment, Michigan State University.

She added, "Unfortunately, our findings also confirmed many persistent challenges that undermine full success."

The challenges they identified include:

- Ongoing support needs such as benefits counseling, follow-along, and retention support, and help with developing workplace accommodations or prompts.
- Limited employment opportunity types that prevent individuals with disabilities from moving beyond entry-level positions in jobs in "the eight Fs of disability employment: food, filth, fetching, folding, filing, flower, festive, and friendly."
- Low hourly wages, hours of work, and work-related benefits.

Dr. Sung noted that while effective transition practices exist that prepare and support students with disabilities for a smooth school-to-work transition and improve employment outcomes, there is still a big gap in evidence-based follow-along supports and practices after graduation.

"More follow-up supports and practices are needed so they don't fall off the service cliff or stall in a dead end," she explained.

Co-lead investigator Marisa H. Fisher, Ph.D., BCBA-D, elaborated, "As

we approach the 10th anniversary of the enactment of the federal initiative Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) in 2024, the importance of pre-employment transition services for students with disabilities should be more heavily emphasized as well as promoting interagency collaboration between vocational rehabilitation agencies and school systems."

"Practitioners should also consider conducting regular check-ins with graduates to follow up and identify additional [employment](#) support needs and implement regular collaborative communication channels with these partners."

More information: Connie Sung et al, Employment outcomes and support needs of Michigan Project SEARCH graduates with intellectual and developmental disabilities: A mixed-method study, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* (2023). [DOI: 10.3233/JVR-230042](https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-230042)

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