VCU RRTC on Employment for Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities

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Experts in the field from VCU Transition RRTC developed and offered an evidence-based course on providing supports to college students with I/DD who have an interest in participating in paid employment to increase their employment prospects after leaving college. The course content and TA is based on the expertise gained by project staff implementing an inclusive higher education program at VCU since 2010.

The VCU ACE-IT in College model is a fully-inclusive two-year program that blends academic courses (regular college classes) with employment preparation. Students engage in a variety of career development activities to build their skills and preparedness for post-graduation competitive integrated employment (CIE). The goal of VCU ACE-IT in College is not only to get students jobs, but interest-driven careers. Our work in ACE-IT is based on evidenced based practices of supported employment principles. We believe the employment supports and career preparation activities incorporated as part of the ACE-IT program has resulted in strong post-college employment of the student participants. Our students have maintained a 86% employ-ment rate and have received pay increases and additional responsibilities in their positions.

This poster describes the process involved in developing a 6-week online course, followed by year-long technical assistance (TA). The course and TA are professional develop-ment for those who assist students with disabilities in transitioning from college to work. The college staff are trained to provide supports to non-traditional college students who have an interest in participating in paid employment to increase their employment prospects after leaving college.

When expanding this program outside of the single university, study staff focused on implementation evaluation measures, using Fixsen et al’s (2010) Implementation Science Model, which includes four stages of implementation – Exploration, Installation, Initial Implementation, and Full Implementation. Our program is currently in the Initial Implementation stage. The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) has also reported positive correlations between fidelity and outcomes (NIRN, 2019). NIRN has provided access to a wide array of research on this, and we used the CDC’s Replicating Effective Programs (REP) framework to develop our evaluation processes. The components of the REP framework are Pre-Conditions, Pre-Implementation, Implementation, and Maintenance and Evolution, with our program currently at the Implementation component.

According to Stains and Vickrey (2017), implementation fidelity has often been ignored, with the main focus being on the outcomes, particularly with education research. Because of the study team’s intensive TA, we are able to collect implementation data and monitor the differences between the control and experimental groups. Stains and Vickrey state that fidelity measures must be developed and utilized when studying an evidence-based instructional practice. Our study uses the CDC’s REP framework, providing further evidence of Stains and Vickrey’s claims that fidelity has been used almost exclusively in the healthcare arena.

We are shining our light on the importance of using fidelity measures to increase out-comes for course participants and ultimately, their students. In addition, fidelity is critical for sustainability of programs as well as scaling up evidenced-based practices. Implementation fidelity should be a part of any evaluation for any program, whether it’s the only evaluation com-ponent, or one part of the evaluation activities. Any researcher who would like to produce and generate evidence of best practices through their program should include fidelity of implemen-tation. Fidelity of treatment is applicable in all disciplines. We have built in fidelity measures from the beginning, and we are now modifying our program through a global pandemic.

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National Implementation Research Network (2019). *Learn implementation*. Retrieved from: <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/learn-implementation>

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