

Keys to a Successful Transition: Ensuring Youth with Visual Impairments are Ready for Career and College

Youth and young adults often face challenges to entering the workforce, and experience a higher rate of unemployment than adults. This challenge is magnified for youth who are blind or have low vision (those with visual impairments), who must overcome additional barriers to enter the workforce.

State vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs provide transition services to youth with disabilities to help them transition smoothly from high school to either college or employment. Transition services were strengthened in 2016 with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which requires VR agencies to reserve at least 15% of their federal funding for pre-employment transition services for youth. Families, schools, and VR professionals work together to use these funds to help young people discover their career interests and help them master the skills they need to achieve success.

Researchers from the National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision (NRTC) have completed years of research about transition-age youth with visual impairments and the factors that contribute to their success in employment. Across eight published studies, NRTC researchers have used a variety of techniques to answer the question: What does it take to prepare youth with visual impairments to successfully obtain employment?

The summaries below highlight three key themes from our research that are linked to positive employment outcomes for visually impaired youth: early work experience, academic achievement, and social/internal skills. Following these overviews, a series of research takeaways illustrate practical ideas for translating research findings into practice.

Early Work Experience

Encouraging youth with visual impairments to gain work experience while they are still in high school can potentially have a significant impact on their employment outcomes down the road. Numerous NRTC studies found that, if a young person gains work experience early in life, they are more likely to be employed when they are older (McDonnall & Crudden, 2009; McDonnall, 2010b; McDonnall, 2011; Giesen & Cavanaugh, 2012; Lund 2020).

Facilitating quality work experiences for youth with visual impairments is challenging. One study found that most youth jobs last fewer than six months and do not require high levels of skill (McDonnall, 2010a). In another study, school-sponsored work experiences did not affect future career success (McDonnall & O'Mally, 2012). Such findings indicate that not all jobs carry equal benefits, and it's important to consider the quality of work experiences for youth. A few factors to consider:

- **Finding jobs independently:** The ability to secure a job as a teenager, without help from adults, demonstrates initiative and problem-solving skills and is associated with employment later in life (McDonnall & O'Mally, 2012).
- **Holding multiple jobs:** One study found that the odds of finding employment as an adult increased with each additional job held while a young adult (McDonnall, 2011).
- **Holding jobs for longer periods of time:** Having multiple jobs is good, but this positive effect can be diminished if students hold multiple short-term positions, rather than a few, longer-term experiences (McDonnall & O'Mally, 2012).

Why is early work experience so important? Several factors may be at play, because early work experience:

- Allows students to explore career interests and discover what they like to do
- Acclimates students to workplace norms and helps them develop soft skills, such as professional attire and workplace etiquette

- Helps students develop a network of professional contacts
- Provides an opportunity for students to develop important professional and technical skills
- Signals to prospective employers that a student can successfully participate in a workplace, making them less of a hiring “risk”
- Provides an opportunity to practice disclosing their visual impairment and discussing accommodations with employers

Academic Achievement

While gaining work experience is important for youth with visual impairments, academic achievement is also essential. Multiple studies found that higher levels of academic achievement increase the odds of finding a job later in life (McDonnall & Crudden, 2009; McDonnall, 2010b; McDonnall, 2011).

Academic achievement can take place at a variety of levels. Two studies looked at aptitude in verbal and math skills during the high school years and found that the better students performed in these areas, the more likely they were to find a job as adults (McDonnall & Crudden, 2009; McDonnall, 2010). Academic achievement during the college years is also important. Postsecondary completion is a significant predictor of short- and long-term employment prospects (Lund and Cmar, 2020).

However, college students with visual impairments may face unique challenges and must take on the responsibility to address these challenges. They will likely encounter accessibility barriers, like inaccessible course materials, websites, or course management systems, and it will be up to them to request any needed services or accommodations.

These challenges may explain why youth with visual impairments tend to take longer to complete their degree than youth without disabilities. The good news is that visually impaired youth tend to complete high school and attend college at similar rates as their non-visually impaired peers. However, the findings around academic achievement indicate that mere school attendance is not enough. Attention must also be paid to content knowledge, ensuring that youth with visual impairments master academic skills, accumulate knowledge, and successfully acquire academic credentials and diplomas.

Social and Internal Skills

A final component of preparing youth with visual impairments to successfully find a job are social and internal skills. Social skills encompass a wide variety of behaviors, from an understanding of interpersonal boundaries to the ability to recognize others’ emotions. One study found that having good peer social skills significantly increases the odds of gaining part-time employment (McDonnall, 2011). Another study that asked a focus group of VR professionals to discuss success factors for transition-age youth pinpointed social skills as an essential need (Crudden, 2012). In particular, these professionals pointed out the need to start developing youths’ social skills as early as possible, beginning in the elementary grades.

Two internal skills were identified in the research as important for predicting employment among youth with visual impairments: self-determination and locus of control (McDonnall & Crudden, 2009). The two concepts are related: Young people with a strong locus of control have mastered one aspect of self-determination. These skills help youths understand that they have control over what happens to them and to feel powerful. This confidence may prompt young people to take a more active role in their career development, priming them for employment success later in life.

Research Takeaways

- **Encourage young people to consider work experience an essential part of their high school years.** Jobs can take place after school, on weekends, during the summer, or during holiday breaks. They may take the form of paid jobs, internships, or job training programs. Youth may need help obtaining their first work experiences. Still, they should learn how to look for jobs independently, and, once they have some experience, pursue opportunities on their own.

- **Not all jobs are created equal.** Before a student looks for a job, they should consider factors such as type of work, how the job will be obtained, and how long the job will last.
- **Don't neglect other essential aspects of personal development in favor of work experience.** Neglecting academics or skill development in favor of working may end up negatively impacting a young person in the long run. But, completely neglecting work experience in favor of academics, which youth are sometimes encouraged to do, is not desirable either.
- **Provide youth with opportunities for decision-making and support them in their choices.** This will help them develop a strong locus of control and sense of self-determination. One important way to do this is to encourage active involvement from young people in their Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings.
- **For both academic and social skills, the earlier development begins, the better.** Transition services are required to be initiated by age 16, but beginning services at a younger age is better, and is often happening now with WIOA. The earlier gaps in academic and social skills are identified, the more quickly they can be improved through intervention and training.

Learn More

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