FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE EMPLOYABILITY OF TRANSITION-AGE INDIVIDUALS WITH SEVERE INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES: REHABILITATION PROVIDERS’ PERSPECTIVES

BY

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DISSENYATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was two-fold. It first aimed to facilitate a more in-depth understanding of what rehabilitation providers believe to be the critical job and job-related skills and vocational experiences needed by transition-age students with severe intellectual disabilities. It also attempted to gather rehabilitation providers’ perspectives on how other factors affected their decisions about whether to provide employment services to a student with severe intellectual disabilities. Qualitative interviews with rehabilitation providers were used to explore these two areas. The most important skills identified by participants were social skills and skills related to motivation and work ethics, whereas the most important experience identified was participation in paid work experiences prior to exiting school. Factors identified as influencing rehabilitation providers’ decisions about employment services for students with severe disabilities included student, family, school, rehabilitation provider, and community factors.
Acknowledgments

The completion of this work would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of many individuals who contributed to my growth both professionally and personally. I owe each and every one of you an enormous debt and I am grateful for your investment in me and in my work.

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I will forever be grateful for the chance to study at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to work with and learn from some of the most amazing people and researchers. I will always be indebted to Dr. John Trach for sharing his time and knowledge with me, and for his investment in me as a researcher, professional, and person. I would also like to thank Dr. Karrie Shogren, Dr. Jan Gaffney, and Dr. Jim Shriner for their support and guidance. Thank you to my cohort: Lumi, Charis, Natalie, Alicia, and Elham. Each of you has played an integral part in helping me get to this point and in spurring me along through your advice, ideas, and passion for improving the lives of individuals with disabilities.
Thank you to my SCORE family who has continued to inspire me. Alicia, you have been with me all along and I could not have asked for a better partner to challenge and cheer me. Sarah, your knowledge, passion, and grace continually amaze me. Michelle your kindness and guidance have been invaluable to me. Shari, for your continued dedication to and assistance with research I will be forever grateful. Kim and Tanya, thank you for generously providing your time and effort to help complete this research.

I would also like to express my appreciation and gratitude to the executive boards of the Transition Specialties and Job Placement Divisions of the National Rehabilitation Association. In particular I wish to thank Gary Rainaldi and Elizabeth Watson for their guidance and encouragement in executing this study. I would also like to thank the participants in this research study for their willingness to share their time and insights into the employment of transition-age students with disabilities. You have made an important contribution to the field by furthering understanding of the factors that affect rehabilitation providers’ decisions about the provision of employment services to students with severe disabilities.

To my family and outside cheering section you are the last in this acknowledgement, but your love, assistance, and encouragement cannot be eclipsed. Mom, Dad, Chip, Yi, Denning, Annie, Chris, Jean, Sandra, Fr. E, and Dan, “thank you” cannot begin to cover it.
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Chapter I

Introduction

Students with severe disabilities are often not successfully transitioning from high school to community-based employment (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Wagner, Newman Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). The rates at which individuals with disabilities are gainfully employed have remained fairly stagnant for the last 30 years and individuals with (severe) intellectual disabilities have tended to fair the worst (Test, Aspel, & Everson, 2006; Wagner et al., 2005). Many efforts have been made legislatively and socially to try to ensure that students with disabilities can successfully transition from high school to employment, but these efforts are not translating to results.

Youth between the ages of 14 and 25 with disabilities make up more than 14% of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) consumers. Many of these students apply for VR services while they are still in school and receiving special education services (Hayward & Schmidt-Davis, 2000). Cameto, Levine, and Wagner (2004) found that the most frequently identified transition planning contact for students with disabilities was to a VR agency (38%) and most students had non-sheltered employment as their goal (only 5% had sheltered work as a goal). In addition, they found that more than 60% of students who receive VR services become employed; however, many students, especially those with the most severe disabilities, fail to transition to employment.

The prioritization of services to individuals with the most severe disabilities is a key tenant of supported employment. Although students with severe disabilities are to be granted priority in service provision, they often are deemed to have a “disability that is too severe” and are “ineligible” for employment services through VR. A lack of job and job-related skills needed to gain and maintain community employment is often cited as a reason that these individuals are
not finding employment success (Agran, Snow & Swaner, 1999; Dymond, 2004; Inge, Wehman, & Dymond, 2005; White & Weiner, 2004) and not even being seen as a viable employment candidate. Researchers have found that a variety of skills and experiences that students should encounter during the high school years can predict a successful transition to employment (Benz et al. 1997; Moon, Simonsen, & Neubert, 2011; Harvey, Bauserman, & Bollinger, 2012; Riesen, Schultz, Morgan, & Kupferman, 2014). When students have access to instruction and experiences related to social skills, vocational education and instruction, interactions with same-age peers, self-determination, and employment before graduation, they are often more likely to successfully transition into employment after high school.

The types and amount of job-related skills and experiences that a student possesses when he or she pursues employment can affect a student’s employability, but many different factors outside of the students’ control may also influence their ability to transition into employment. Student factors such as gender, severity of disability, and the sources of funding the student received, may impact individuals’ decisions about the employability of an individual. Conversely, factors associated with other stakeholders (i.e., parents, school personnel, employers, and rehabilitation providers), and their training, knowledge and experiences with transition and ability to collaborate with each other can affect the transition success of the student. Even factors such as where the student lives, type of employment services available, or the economic climate may impact the student's chances of finding gainful employment.

Despite the large amount of research that has been collected about what makes a student with disabilities more “employable,” there has been limited research about how rehabilitation providers make decisions about the “employability” of individuals with severe intellectual disabilities. Studies exist that use primarily quantitative methods that ask rehabilitation providers
to rate and categorize the skills that they believe make individuals with disabilities employable (Moon et al., 2011; Sale, Metzler, Everson, & Moon, 1991). Unfortunately, these studies provide limited understanding of rehabilitation providers’ views about the employability of individuals with severe disabilities, and fail to adequately explain how rehabilitation providers make decisions about the provision of services. Consequently, there is a need for a more in-depth qualitative investigation of rehabilitation providers’ beliefs about the skills and experiences needed by students with severe intellectual disabilities in order to obtain employment services. Additionally, research should also examine how other influences, outside of the student’s skill set, affect the professional decisions rehabilitation providers make about the employability of students with severe intellectual disabilities.

**The Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate rehabilitation providers’ perceptions about assisting transition-age students with severe intellectual disabilities to obtain competitive employment. Qualitative interviews were chosen to explore these providers’ views and practices. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of skills and experiences do rehabilitation providers believe impact the ability of students with severe intellectual disabilities to obtain employment services?

2. What factors influence the decision making process of rehabilitation providers about the provision of employment services to transition-age students with severe intellectual disabilities?

**Definitions/Terminology**

Key terminology used throughout this study is defined in this section.

1. **Rehabilitation Provider:** Individuals employed by a state vocational rehabilitation provider, community rehabilitation provider, or private rehabilitation provider in the roles
of vocational rehabilitation counselors, employment training specialists, or transition specialists.

2. **Service provider:** Individuals or organizations (from schools or vocational rehabilitation) that provide services to assist students as they transition from high school to employment.

3. **Stakeholder:** Individuals who are involved in the transition of students with disabilities from high school to employment, including students, their families, school personnel, rehabilitation providers, employers, and community members.

4. **Severe intellectual disability:** Individuals of all ages who require extensive ongoing support in more than one major life activity in order to participate in integrated community settings and to enjoy a quality of life that is available to citizens with fewer or no disabilities (TASH, n.d.).

5. **Transition-age students with disabilities:** Individuals ages 14-22 who have a disability.

**Summary of Methodology**

Qualitative methods in the form of in-depth interviews were used in this study. Participants included rehabilitation providers who were members of the National Rehabilitation Association (NRA), attended the NRA national conference, or were referred by an NRA member. In addition, participants had more than 3 years of experience assisting students with severe disabilities transition from high school to employment. Rehabilitation providers were recruited by email and through a flyer disseminated at the NRA conference. Individuals interested in participating in the study were screened to ensure that they fit the study criteria and were appropriate candidates to answer the research questions (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). Those individuals that met the study criteria were invited to participate in an online or phone interview conducted via Skype or GoogleHangout about their experiences assisting students with severe intellectual disabilities to transition from high school to employment. These interviews were recorded using two separate voice recording software on
two or three electronic devices. Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached and no substantially new data were obtained (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

Following each of the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed and the researcher wrote summaries of each of the interviews. Participants were asked to examine the summary of their interview to ensure that it reflected their beliefs and experiences. Data analysis began once the participants returned their interview summaries and all interview data were transcribed.

The researcher initiated the coding process by reading the interview transcripts and creating descriptive codes. She developed codes for a quarter of the interviews. Codes were grouped initially by type of stakeholder group (i.e., student, family, school, rehabilitation provider, community) involved with transitioning individuals with disabilities. She then provided the research assistant with a list of preliminary codes that the assistant could use to inform her first few attempts at coding. Both the researcher and research assistant read through the first half of the transcripts independently coding line by line to test out the codes and determine if new codes emerged (King & Horrocks, 2010). They then met face-to-face to discuss and revise the codes. The dissertation chair reviewed the preliminary codes to provided feedback about how to clarify and strengthen the codes. The researcher and the research assistant reviewed the feedback and made changes to the several definitions to improve the clarity of the codes. Once these changes were made the researcher and research assistant continued coding the remaining transcripts.

Once all transcripts had been coded, the researcher met with the dissertation chair and research assistant to confirm the final codes. Using the final codes, the researcher re-coded the transcripts (i.e., changed preliminary codes to final codes) and then read each transcript a second
time to ensure uniform application of the codes. Next, codes were grouped into categories of codes that “hung together” and helped to answer the research questions. The dissertation chair and the researcher then reviewed the categories and discussed the evolving sub-themes and overall themes. After this meeting the categories were then further divided by research question. Once grouped into each research question they were refined into sub-themes and then further condensed into themes that represented reoccurring patterns in the data (Cresswell, 2011; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The dissertation chair reviewed iterations of thematic development, thereby assisting the researcher to arrive at greater understanding of the data.

Throughout the research process great attention was paid to ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the data (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Member checks with participants were undertaken where each participant reviewed a summary of the major points from his/her interview to ensure accuracy of information. In addition, collaborative coding and discussion with another knowledgeable researcher was used. The two researchers met to develop, discuss, and refine the codes on a weekly basis while coding the interview transcripts. Also, debriefings occurred two separate times with the dissertation chair to clarify and strengthen the codes, categories, sub-themes, and themes. Also, care was taken to ensure that the procedures for data collection and analysis were clearly outlined and systematically followed, and that the researcher was regularly reflecting and acknowledging her own biases.

**Major Findings**

Many of the skills and experiences identified by rehabilitation providers as critical to receiving employment services are well supported within the literature. One method that emerged that extended beyond what is recommended in the literature was the emphasis
participants placed on work experiences. Participants felt that the best way for students to prepare for employment was for them to have vocational experiences in home-based, school, and community environments. Critical components of these experiences are that they must provide students with realistic opportunities to hone their social, self-determination, and job skills.

Although the participants identified many critical skills and experiences that students need to obtain employment services, they also noted many other factors that influence decisions about services. These factors included student, family, school, rehabilitation provider, and community issues. In summary:

- The support needs of the students, especially in relation to behaviors and communication, and whether others are able to appropriately address that support need will have a large bearing on students’ chances of receiving employment services.

- Family members, but especially mothers, have a huge effect on what the expected outcomes for a student will be depending on their ability to advocate, buy-in and collaborate with others, and support the student.

- The effort, resources, and curriculum options put forth by school personnel and the schools they work for will have a large impact on students’ abilities to receive employment services.

- Many rehabilitation providers reported that they are already over extended with the size and manageability of their caseload and are worried about providing services to students with greater support needs. If students do not come with appropriate skills and experiences, the ability of the rehabilitation providers to support the student will be further diminished.

- The disability awareness and acceptance of employers and other community members, as well as the local labor market, in the environments that students are pursuing work can either help or hurt students with disabilities in receiving employment services.

Two themes emerged regarding why students are denied employment services. First, students with disabilities are often not held to appropriate expectations. Stakeholders are either not realistic about the student’s skills and limitations (and expect too much from the student), or hold expectations that are far too low (and the student is being enabled and/or reinforced in inappropriate actions). The second theme that permeated this study was the notion that all
stakeholders need to collaborate and be knowledgeable in order to make sure that the student is able to receive the skills, experiences, and supports they need to be successful in their pursuit of employment services. Unrealistic expectations and lack of collaboration/knowledge about preparing students with severe disabilities for employment were found to have adverse effects on decisions that were made about eligibility for employment services.
Chapter II

Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of the literature in 10 areas critical to understanding the employment outcomes of transition-age individuals with severe disabilities. These areas include: (a) definition of severe intellectual disabilities, (b) theoretical framework, (c) a historical and legislative framework, (d) employment options for individuals with disabilities, (e) vocational rehabilitation and transitioning to employment, (f) collaboration between key stakeholders, (g) employment and transition-age students with severe disabilities, (h) relevant curriculum and experiences during school, (i) factors that influence employment success, and (j) perceptions of rehabilitation service providers. A statement of the problem and rational for the proposed research concludes this chapter.

Definition of Severe Intellectual Disabilities

Definitions and diagnostic criteria for intellectual disability vary across human service providers and the professional organization to which they belong. Two of the most common definitions cited in the literature come from the American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) and the American Psychiatric Association (APA). AAIDD defines intellectual disability as “a disability characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior, which covers many everyday social and practical skills. This disability originates before the age of 18” (AAIDD.org Intellectual Disability Definition section, para. 1). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) published by the APA, states “intellectual disability is a disorder with onset during the developmental period that includes both intellectual and adaptive functioning deficits
in conceptual, social, and practical domains” (p. 33). Further description is given to this definition within the manual:

Intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder) is characterized by deficits in general mental abilities, such as reasoning, problem solving, planning, abstract thinking, judgment, academic learning, and learning from experiences. The deficits result in impairment of adaptive functioning, such as individual fails to meet standards of personal independence and social responsibility in one or more aspects of daily life including communication, social participation, academic or occupational functioning, and personal independence at home or in community settings. (p. 31)

Within intellectual disabilities there is a narrowing of definition to define individuals with severe intellectual disabilities. These individuals’ intellectual disabilities often require more intensive supports to function across all life domains. TASH, a national organization that champions the causes most often confronting individuals with severe disabilities, defines severe intellectual disabilities as:

Individuals of all ages who require extensive ongoing support in more than one major life activity in order to participate in integrated community settings and to enjoy a quality of life that is available to citizens with fewer or no disabilities. (TASH, n.d.)

In light of the fact that these definitions vary across professional organizations, as well as the fact that the professional organization that was targeted in this investigation (i.e., National Rehabilitation Association) does not have a publicized definition of severe intellectual disabilities, the researcher drafted her own definition to incorporate key and common components of the definitions outlined above. For purposes of this study, severe intellectual disabilities was defined as a disability that significantly impacts intellectual functioning of the individual, requiring extensive and ongoing supports in life activities, including employment, in order to fully participate in their community. However, since it is common knowledge that individuals define severe intellectual disabilities differently; participants were asked how they define severe intellectual disabilities.
Theoretical Framework

The World Health Organization’s International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) outline three different levels of disability. The first level of impairments looks at differences in how a body part functions or is formed. The second level addresses activity limitations, which means that there are differences in how an individual is able to participate in various activities. The third level refers to participation restrictions where issues occur in the various life domains. Within the ICF, both the intrinsic and environmental factors of an individual affect their interactions with and functioning in work and inform their level of disability. Both the actual action, the “performance,” and the individual’s ability to perform that action to the desired degree, the “capacity,” must be considered in the assigning of disability.

The innate traits of an individual do not necessarily make an individual disabled, but it is how these traits interface with other factors in the environment that cause an individual to have a limitation that is categorized as “severe.” This idea is also applicable to employment of individuals. The mere fact that an individual intellectually functions two standard deviations below the norm does not automatically prevent him or her from being employed. It is the other factors, both people and environment, which may cause an individual with severe disability to be employable.

Historical and Legislative Framework

The pursuit of helping individuals with disabilities to become respected and productive members of society has been an extensive process. For much of human history individuals with disabilities were seen as burdens to their families and to society, and were not thought to be able to contribute to the common societal good. However, as wounded soldiers and other individuals
began returning from battle in the World Wars, Congress passed bills such as the Soldiers Rehabilitation Act of 1918 and the Smith-Fess Vocational Act of 1920, which provided opportunities for those returning with disabilities to support themselves and live independent lives. These pieces of legislation were the first to directly address the employment of individuals with disabilities. Considerable legislation has been passed since this time that affects the employment of individuals with disabilities (see Table 1).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Law</th>
<th>Provisions</th>
<th>Implications</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soldiers Rehabilitation Act of 1918</td>
<td>This act introduced the concept of disability support as more than just money, but also training for injured vets</td>
<td>When first passed it only applied to veterans, but in 1920 it was expanded to all individuals with physical disabilities, not just soldiers. Many consider it the beginning of vocational rehabilitation in the United States. The 1943 Amendment expanded it to include intellectual disability and mental health disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith-Fess Vocational Act</td>
<td>This act grants provided training to assist individuals with disabilities to get job training and counseling</td>
<td>When first passed it applied primarily to only those with physical disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehabilitation Act of 1973</td>
<td>This act was the first directed at individuals with severe physical and intellectual disabilities to help them achieve greater participation in society</td>
<td>Individuals with disabilities were granted greater chances to participate in all aspects of society and be a causal agent in their own life. The act helped to show that all individuals have value and can be productive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title 1</td>
<td>This title formed and dictates roles for the Rehabilitation Service Administration</td>
<td>This section formed vocational rehabilitation and its governing board as we know it today</td>
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<th>Law</th>
<th>Provisions</th>
<th>Implications</th>
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<tr>
<td>Title 3</td>
<td>This title provides for the formation of Community Rehabilitation Providers</td>
<td>Community Rehabilitation Providers are the main service providers for individuals with severe intellectual disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title 5</td>
<td>The contents of this section refers to rights and advocacy</td>
<td>This section describes how governmental projects are funded and protects the rights of people with disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title 6</td>
<td>This section discusses employment in industry and supported employment</td>
<td>This section provides a mandate for individuals with the most severe disabilities to receive priority in employment services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madeline Will “Bridges”</td>
<td>This initiative made transition a federal initiative.</td>
<td>It allowed for more resources and focus to be direct towards improving the transition outcomes of students with disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair Labor Standards Act and Section 511 of the Workforce Investment Act</td>
<td>Organizations can obtain 511 certificates that will allow them to pay individuals a subminimum wage.</td>
<td>Subminimum wage is permitted through Section 511.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl Perkins Act 1990</td>
<td>This act established a framework for creating structured programs to assist students with disabilities to prepare for future employment once they leave high school regardless of whether they pursue further education.</td>
<td>It helped to ensure training for students regardless of disability or post-secondary plan (i.e., whether pursuing college or work).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americans with Disabilities Act</td>
<td>This act further assisted individuals with disabilities in their pursuit of improved civil right and better employment outcomes by further ensuring civil rights protections for individuals with disabilities.</td>
<td>It provided Civil Rights for individuals with disabilities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>All Handicapped Children’s Act</td>
<td>This act ensures that student with disabilities are afforded a fair and appropriate education in their home school.</td>
<td>Students with disabilities could go to their home school and receive a free and appropriate education.</td>
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<td>IDEA 1990</td>
<td>This law required transition services and components to be part of a student Individual Education Plan by 16</td>
<td>Transition planning was mandated and began to be taken seriously.</td>
</tr>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>This amendment moved transition planning down to age 14 from age 16.</td>
<td>This helped transition planning started earlier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>These amendments moved transition planning back to 16, but now require goal beyond high school in IEP and appropriate measurable goals based on age appropriate transition assessments.</td>
<td>This amendment placed more focus on post-school goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program 2001</td>
<td>It was decreed that sheltered work is no longer able to be counted as a successful vocational rehabilitation outcome.</td>
<td>Vocational Rehabilitation can no longer call sheltered workshops a successful placement, but the number of individuals placed in sheltered employment continues to climb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), (Reauthorization of WIA 1998)</td>
<td>This law had many ramifications that impacted the provision of transition services for students with disabilities including: (A) Individuals up to age 25 must try integrated employment before they can enter sheltered subminimum wage jobs.</td>
<td>Vocational Rehabilitation may have a more active role in ensuring the transitioning of individuals with disabilities from high school to competitive employment/customize employment is a list VR option under supported employment and extended support may be funded longer.</td>
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<td>WIOA (con’t)</td>
<td>(B) A minimum of 15% of VR funds must be used for transition services</td>
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<td>(C) The definitions of competitive integrated employment and customized employment were strengthened</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(D) The money that states receive under Title VI must be used to support the transitioning of individuals up to age 24 with the most significant disabilities including use of extended supports</td>
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Legislation affecting the employment of individuals with disabilities has evolved over time. The Rehabilitation Act Amendment of 1954 created work study programs for all people with disabilities and further expanded the services provided to individuals with intellectual and psychological disabilities. Also, this revision provided greater grant funding for the training of the individuals who would support individuals with disabilities in their attempts to live an independent life. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, especially Section 504, enhanced the rights of individuals with disabilities to live a more integrated life. It also prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities in public settings, both work and education. Through this Act, individuals were able to become more productive members of society. Also, with the passage of Title 1 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) was formed. The formation of the RSA allowed individuals with disabilities, but in particular individuals with the most severe disabilities, to gain increased access to integrated employment.
and a meaningful life. These aims were further extended with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, which is civil rights legislation for individuals with disabilities, and the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, which aimed to improve employment outcomes by creating a “one-stop” delivery system for employment services. Title IV of the WIA reauthorized and amended the Rehabilitation Act.

Significant legislation has also focused on improving the employment outcomes of transition-age students with disabilities. The law that most affects students with severe intellectual disabilities and their transition to employment is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In 1990, IDEA broadened the definition of special education to include vocational education, and required students age 16 and older to have a transition component as part of their IEP. In 1997 a transition component was required to be part the IEP for all students 14 and older. In the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, the age to include a transition component was raised back to 16 and a requirement was added to include measurable goals, including post-school goals, based on age-appropriate transition assessments.

IDEA and its revisions increased the focus on helping students with disabilities and other involved stakeholders plan for transition to adulthood. The reporting and planning requirements of IDEA 2004 were further extended by the United States Department of Education through the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), which required all states to develop and submit State Performance Plans about their performance on 20 indicators of student performance. Indictors 13, which requires post-school goals in all transition IEPs, and 14, which requires schools to report on students’ post-school outcomes one year after the student graduates, are the indicators that most effect transition-age students with severe intellectual disabilities. These two indicators also help to ensure that schools are paying attention to students’ post-school outcomes.
Schools are also required to keep track of students’ progress and goals through their reporting of students’ Summary of Performance (SOP).

Most recently, the transitioning of students with disabilities to employment is once again in the forefront of the national legislative agenda with the re-authorization of the WIA, now known as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014). WIOA has many implications for transitioning students with severe intellectual disabilities to employment. Specifically, the reauthorization allocates 15% of VR funds to transition services, expands the role of VR for transition services, extends the amount of time extended services can be provided, and redefines competitive integrated employment. The provision that has the potential to have the most effect on the transition of young people with severe intellectual disabilities from high school to employment is the requirement that individuals with disabilities up to age 25 must try an integrated job paying at least minimum wage before entering sheltered work. Unfortunately, students can still work for sub-minimum wage when under age 25 if they are deemed ineligible for VR services.

**Employment Options for Individuals with Disabilities**

The employment options available to students with disabilities generally fall into three main categories (i.e., sheltered employment, supported employment, customized employment). Each of these types of employment has advantages and disadvantages and each type has in many ways evolved from the limitations of the type before it. Each employment option will be highlighted below.

**Sheltered employment.** Sheltered work occurs when an individual with disabilities is working with other individuals with disabilities in a segregated environment. Sheltered workshops have been used historically to provide opportunities for individuals, thought to not be
ready for competitive employment, to improve themselves and their productivity through structured, supervised work experience. Sheltered work typically consists of repetitive tasks performed for subminimum wage. These workshops were first used with individuals with intellectual disabilities around the time that wounded soldiers returned from the World Wars (Migliore, 2010). Individuals with disabilities were finally able to “work” to better themselves and the community, but they were still kept out of view of the general public. Unfortunately, the fact that sheltered work did not, and continues to not, pay a livable wage decreased the independence of individuals with disabilities and continued to marginalize them (Wolfensberger, 1974). Sheltered work promotes dependency and isolation from the community and peers without disabilities (Kregel & Dean, 2002).

In 2001 the State Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program determined that sheltered employment would no longer be considered a viable “employment outcome” for individuals with disabilities (State Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program, 2001). Despite this decision, individuals with the most severe disabilities have continued to be placed in sheltered work for subminimum wage or spend their days in day programs. In 2006, 56% of day/work recipients received services in segregated settings. In fact, between 2004 and 2006, an additional 6,826 individuals were placed in sheltered work and 27,573 in day programs, yet only 1,331 individuals were placed in supported employment (Braddock, Hemp, & Rizzolo, 2008). Although VR cannot support these individuals in sheltered employment, other entities can apply for a 511 certificate and pay individuals subminimum wage. This caveat is made possible by the Fair Labor Standards Act and Section 511 of the Workforce Investment Act. Usually a community rehabilitation provider (CRP), often a not-for-profit or private entity, will be the provider of these services for individuals with severe intellectual disabilities, particularly if the
individual is served in a sheltered environment (Metzel, Boeltzig, Butterworth, Sulewski, & Gilmore, 2007).

**Supported employment.** The inadequacies of sheltered employment placement were recognized as individuals, including those with the most severe intellectual disabilities, demonstrated the ability to perform more complex (and rewarding) work than was being offered in sheltered workshops (Gold, 1972). Research has repeatedly demonstrated that individuals with disabilities can successfully work in integrated settings for a competitive wage (Brown, Shiraga, & Kessler, 2006; Cimera, 2009; Rusch & Braddock, 2004).

The Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1986 officially recognized supported employment as a service option for individuals with disabilities. Supported employment was defined by this act as:

> Competitive work in an integrated work setting for individuals who, because of their handicaps, need ongoing support services to perform that work. Supported work is limited to individuals with severe handicaps for whom competitive employment has not traditionally occurred or individuals for whom competitive employment has been interrupted or intermittent. (p. 30546)

The three critical parts of this definition were that it must be competitive work, completed in an integrated work-setting, and that on-going supports must be provided in order for the individual to perform the job and maintain employment. On-going services are provided for the duration of the individual’s employment or until no longer needed. Services can be provided in the form of employment specialists, assistive technology, specialized job training and transportation, and are required for the individual to maintain gainful employment. The focus on individuals with the most severe disabilities is also a critical part of supported employment highlighted in the original Act and through all revisions.

In 2014 the WIOA clarified the definition of supported employment to state that employment must be in integrated settings and must be in, or working towards, competitive
employment. According to Wehman, Targett, and West (2014) there are eight other characteristics and values that are associated with supported employment. These values and characteristics include a focus on: (a) work opportunities for all in the community, (b) a person’s abilities, not weaknesses, when finding work, (c) understanding the needs and resources of potential employers, (d) real work for real pay, (e) knowing that employing a person with a disability is not different from employing other people, (f) integration as a process that must be worked towards, (g) providing supports in the least obtrusive way, and (h) long-term ongoing follow along services as being critical to employment success.

There are three main ways in which supported employment is typically offered: individual placement, group placement, or enclav (Drew & Hardman, 2007; McDonnell, Hardman, & McDonnell, 2003). Individual placement occurs when a single individual with disabilities is placed in competitive employment in the community. This person is supported by an employment specialist who assists the individual with disabilities with gaining and maintaining employment by attempting to find the individual a job that matches his or her skills and interests.

Group placements include eight or fewer individuals working together under a single supervisor for a minimum of 20 hours a week (Hanley-Maxwell et al., 2010; Rusch & Hughes, 1990). In group placements, individuals may work together on the same task or each individual may complete a different task, and tasks may occur at one single location or may involve multiple locations (McDonnell et al., 2003; Wehman et al., 2014). When individuals travel to multiple sites to perform their work (e.g., cleaning, maintenance) the group placement is referred to as a mobile work crew.
The enclave model is similar to the group placement model in that it includes five to eight individuals working in the same site under the direction of an on-site supervisor, and so some claim that it is within the group placement model (Hanley-Maxwell, Owens-Johnson, & Fabian, 2010). The supervisor may work for the organization providing supported employment services or may be hired by the host company (McDonnell et al., 2003). Two types of enclaves can be used, congregate or dispersed. The congregate model occurs when all individuals work in the same location. The dispersed model occurs when individuals work within the same work environment, but will be dispersed across locations. Individuals working within the enclave model may be paid by the employer or by the organization providing supported employment services (Hanley-Maxwell et al., 2010).

**Customized employment.** Supported employment was a huge step forward in the employment of individuals with disabilities, but there is disagreement about whether supported employment is still responsive to the needs and skills of individuals with the most severe disabilities (Degeneffe, 2000; Griffin, Hammis, Geary, & Sullivan, 2007; Lueckling, et al., 2008; Rogers, Lavin, Tran, & Gantenbein, 2008; Wehman et al., 2008). Many stakeholders (e.g., individuals with disabilities, their family members and advocates, researchers) claim that supported employment has become too institutionalized, less person-centered, and less desirable to individuals with disabilities and their family members (Griffin et al., 2007). It has fallen short of many of its goals as it has not (a) replaced sheltered workshops, (b) led to more employment for individuals with the most severe disabilities, (c) enhanced social integration and acceptance of individuals with severe disabilities, and (d) allowed for the uniform delivery of supported employment services in its intended form (Degeneffe, 2000). There is a need to work towards
better fulfillment of the “zero-exclusion” goal of supported employment where every individual who wants to work is able to find success in integrated employment (Rubin & Roessler, 2008).

Consumer dissatisfaction with the way supported employment was being administered led to the development of the customized employment movement. In 2002 the United States Department of Labor, Office of Disability and Employment Policy (ODEP) defined customized employment and funded grants to investigate its implementation (ODEP, 2002). Customized employment is a subset of supported employment designed to “meet the specific abilities of the individual with a significant disability and businesses needs of the employer” (29 U.S.C. § 705, p. 7) and is now included in the definition of supported employment provided by the WIOA (2014). The WIOA defines customized employment as:

> competitive integrated employment, for an individual with a significant disability, that is based on an individualized determination of the strengths, needs, and interests of the individual with a significant disability. (29 U.S.C. § 705, p. 7)

Job development in this model can take many different forms (Griffin et al., 2008; Nitterourer, Pickens, & Shogren, 2015). The first is through task reassignment. An individual with disabilities enters into a new job position, with a job description created for that particular individual, while meeting unmet workplace needs. The second is through job-carving. An existing job description is modified to select tasks that the individual with disabilities can complete that will be of benefit to the employer and fill a workplace need. The third form is job sharing. Two or more individuals share tasks and responsibilities to complete a job. The fourth and final form is self-employment.

**Employment outcomes.** The transition from societal rejection of sheltered employment to competitive employment has not been without issue. The rates at which individuals with disabilities are paid and employed are much lower than their peers without disabilities (Benz,
Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Wagner, Newman, Garza, & Levine, 2005). In addition, individuals with intellectual disabilities seeking competitive employment have struggled more than those with physical disabilities, and those with the most severe intellectual disabilities have tended to have the worst outcomes (Test, Aspel, & Everson, 2006; Wagner et al., 2006; Wehman, 2006).

Numerous studies have shown that individuals with disabilities benefit financially from participation in integrated, person-centered supported employment. This financial benefit, to the individual and to society, of wages earned and taxes paid, occurs even when the costs of the supports and accommodations are factored in (Cimera, 2007; Tines, Rusch, McCaughrin, & Conley, 1990). Individuals that participated in supported employment earned more income and reported better quality of life (Cimera, 2007). These trends and effects have been observed in many of the studies around this topic in the last 30 years (Cimera, 2007; Conley, Rusch, & Heal, 1989; McCaughrin, Ellis, Rusch, & Heal, 1993; Tines, Rusch, McCaughrin, & Conley, 1990).

Individuals with the most severe disabilities are supposed to be the ones served through supported employment (Rehabilitation Act Amendment, 1986; WIOA, 2014), but this is not always occurring. Individuals with severe disabilities who are not easy to fit into standard jobs are often not seen as viable candidates for employment services (Luecking & Luecking, 2006). Migliore and colleagues (2007, 2008) found the majority of individuals with disabilities (74%) and their families (67%) would prefer to be given the option of integrated employment. This preference was true regardless of any demographic factors including severity of disability. Findings from this study also showed that disability services professionals are often not encouraging adults with disabilities and their families to pursue integrated employment and instead are at times encouraging families to choose sheltered employment. More than one-third
(37%) of families said that no options other than sheltered employment were offered to them. This is happening even though sheltered work is no longer a successful vocational VR placement (State Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program, 2001).

Vocational Rehabilitation and Transitioning to Employment

The employment options available to students with disabilities once they leave high school may be plentiful, but not always available to all students with disabilities. A student must first be deemed eligible for VR services. This is a different way of receiving services as compared to school-based services where all students with disabilities are entitled to services. If a student does qualify for services then assessments must be completed to facilitate decisions about what types of services are most appropriate for the individual.

Eligibility. The three main end goals of the VR process are competitive employment, satisfaction with a job placement, and the ability to be retained in employment because of adequate job performance (Rubin & Roessler, 2008). The RSA has three criteria for an individual to be eligible for employment services under Title 1 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. First, the individual must have a disability that affects his or her ability to work. Second, the individual must need rehabilitation services to obtain and keep a job. Lastly, the individual must be able to keep the job after services have been received (RSA, 1993).

The last criterion is where many students with severe intellectual disabilities are eliminated from eligibility for employment services. Because of the severity of their disability, these individuals are thought to lack the knowledge and experiences that would allow them to remain employed after services end. When working with individuals with intellectual disabilities there are often particular concerns on the part of service providers about the individuals’ physical
capacity, skill acquisition potential, and psychological functioning (Gatens-Robinson & Rubin, 2008). The rehabilitation provider must be able to conclude that the individual with disabilities will be able to obtain skills and find employment through the provision of rehabilitation services (Berven & Drout, 2012). When beginning the eligibility determination process rehabilitation professionals must first presume the employability and benefit of services for all people, and initially have integrated employment as the end goal (Title 1 Rehab Act, 1993), but individuals may be deemed unemployable if their disability is thought too severe.

The eligibility determination is a collaborative effort between the VR professional and the individual applying for services. There are four main stages within the VR eligibility process where these two individuals must collaborate. The first is the intake where an individual’s social-vocational history is collected and assessed. The general medical exam is usually next followed by a physical exam with an appropriate specialist. Lastly, is the vocational evaluation where an individual’s ability to work, their job task performance, their needed training, and their work capacity are assessed (Rubin & Roessler, 2008). These measures of vocational interest and aptitude can help gain clarity about where a good job fit exists and where job satisfaction is likely.

An individual enters the process in Status 02 when they have submitted a written request for services. This is the stage in which information is gathered for determination of services (i.e., eligible for VR services, ineligible for VR services, or eligible for a Trial Work Experience or Extended Work Experiences). If the applicant has a disability which is a substantial barrier to employment and is so severe that the counselor cannot presume benefit from vocational rehabilitation services in terms of an employment outcome, the counselor must use an extended evaluation and/or trial work experience for up to 18 months (Status 06). In Status 06 the
individual is further evaluated and may engage in a number of trial work experiences (i.e., on-the-job training, work adjustment training programs in realistic work settings) to determine if the individual is capable of achieving a successful employment outcome. An individual’s case can be closed if the professional is certain that there is “clear and convincing” evidence that the individual is not able to achieve an employment outcome including supported employment. Closure from Status 02 or 06 occurs in Status 08 where the individual is not accepted for VR employment services.

**Assessment.** Assessment is defined as “systematic procedures to obtain information from a variety of sources to draw inferences about people” (AERA, APA, & NCME, 1999, p. 172). These systematic procedures within the VR system include tests, interviews, observations, medical exams, and job tryouts. Though the assessment process may include all of these things, interviews are the most widely used form of assessment in making service determinations (Berven & Drout, 2012). Within these interviews rehabilitation counselors observe the individual’s interpersonal skills, thought process, affect, memory, and follow-through. Initial (intake) interviews can help with relationship building, attending to client behaviors, and developing a picture of the client’s context, values, and goals.

Three basic procedures are often used for assessing work potential (Rubin & Roessler, 2008). The first is paper and pencil tests or now more commonly a computer-based test, which a VR counselor can administer as a general aptitude battery. It is possible that issues concerning motivation, single trait assessment, lack of comparison norm, and lack of real work stressors can affect the validity of the battery and the outcomes of the test and conclusions. The second procedure is situational assessment or analysis, where the individual performs work tasks in more realistic environments, but this type of assessment can lack real environmental stressors
(e.g., loud noises, other people in the environment, time demands) and is open to subjective interpretation. The third kind of assessment is work sample, where the individual samples the kind of work expected of an employee on the targeted job. This type of assessment can be labor-intensive to set-up and to implement depending on the work goals of the individual with a disability, and the connections and skill sets of the rehabilitation provider. If the rehabilitation providers do not have previous experiences and connections in this area then many service hours may be lost trying to facilitate this type of experience. An individual’s maximum performance, aptitude, and potential must always be balanced with knowledge of their typical performance, achievement, and current mastery.

**Collaboration Between Key Stakeholders**

Students tend to be more successful in independent living and work after high school when there is a high degree of collaboration between all stakeholders before the student exits high school. This collaboration should occur between school personnel and both family members (Carter et al., 2012; Kohler, 1998; Mazzotti, Rowe, Kelley, Test, Fowler et al., 2009; Test, Mazzotti, Mustian, Fowler, Kortering et al., 2009) and rehabilitation providers (Certo et al., 2008; Mazzotti, Rowe, Cameto, Test, & Morningstar, 2013; Oertle & Trach, 2009). With the permission of the individual with disabilities or their guardian, any individual who is responsible for providing or paying for transitioning services must be invited to IEP meetings where transition goals are discussed (IDEA, 2004). Unfortunately, many rehabilitation providers are failing to be invited or choose not to attend these meetings (Agran, Cain, & Cavin, 2002). When not all stakeholders are present, roles are not defined and information is not shared. This lack of collaboration early on may cause a lack of understanding and continuity later in the transition
process. Also, lack of early interactions may result in disconnect between the skills the student is learning and the skills that are viewed as being most critical by rehabilitation providers. When there is a lack of a functional transition team that has knowledge about what other stakeholders do in the transition process, it diminishes a student’s chance of successful transition to employment (Riesen, Schultz, Morgan, & Kupferman, 2014).

**Information sharing.** A willingness to collaborate and share information with other stakeholders and applicable agencies is critical. Linkages between the school and adult services must be in place to help students obtain and maintain employment (Inge & Moon, 2010). Open communication and sharing of authentic vocational assessment data will ensure the student and their skills are represented appropriately throughout the transition process.

Special education personnel can assist the transition to employment process by providing rehabilitation providers with outcome assessment data. These data are most helpful when they provide information about (a) who is entering the system, (b) what their skills and history are, (c) what assessments of skills have been completed and their results, and (d) what deficits exist and the services needed to address those deficits (Brown, Shiraga, & Kessler, 2006; Inge & Moon, 2010). Sharing of important information, like outcomes data, can highlight service needs and promote consistency of programming from high school to adult services (DeStefano & Wagner, 1993).

One way that school districts can provide rehabilitation providers with good information about transition-age students is by providing a student’s Summary of Performance (SOP) data, which the school district is already required to collect. The actual information required in a SOP varies state to state, but it should reflect the student’s academic and functional performance, and include recommendations on how to assist the student in meeting their post-secondary goals.
This information can be of most help to the rehabilitation providers if it is detailed and from the last 2 years (Lamb, 2007). This will provide the rehabilitation providers information about the strengths and weaknesses of the target student. It can also assist the rehabilitation provider with deciding if the employment goal of an individual is reasonable and to know where is an appropriate place to start with employment planning (Lamb, 2007). Unfortunately, often times, rehabilitation providers may receive the student’s IEP, but not the SOP, and the IEP has unrealistic goals and expectations (Moon, Simonsen, & Neubert, 2011). In order for the assessment to lead to a productive placement, the information must go beyond fulfilling IEP measures and help the rehabilitation provider gauge the employability of individuals with disabilities (Harvey, Bauserman, & Bollinger, 2012).

**Roles.** Sharing and collecting information is the responsibility of both special education and vocational rehabilitation. Rehabilitation counselors view themselves as having five basic roles: assessment, affective counseling, vocational counseling, case management, and job placement (Leahy, 2012). Within these roles, providers help individuals with disabilities access services they need, establish working alliances with individuals to develop goals, and individualize plans. Although rehabilitation counselors collect much information during the intake process, school personnel can assist them by providing information about the student (e.g., functional performance, appropriate employment goals) to help them in making decisions about eligibility. A critical aspect of assisting transition-age students is developing and maintaining collaborative partnerships where information is shared and active communication is promoted (Plotner, Trach, & Shogren, 2012).
Relevant Curriculum and Experiences During School

When discussing the successful transition to employment of students with severe intellectual disabilities five curricular and/or experiential areas appear frequently in the literature as empirically-validated practices that are predictive of improved post-school employment outcomes. These areas include (a) inclusion during high school, (b) vocational education and instruction, (c) social skills instruction, (d) self-determination and self-advocacy, and (e) employment before graduation.

Inclusion during high school. While students are in secondary school they should be included with age-appropriate peers and have exposure to similar learning experiences (Baer et al., 2003; White & Weiner, 2004). Test and his colleagues (2009) found that inclusion in general education is a predictor of not just improved post-school employment outcomes, but improved outcomes in post-school education and independent living. Interacting in learning environments with same age peers without disabilities may allow the student to relate to these peers better both now and in the future. It not only provides an environment where individuals can interact, but also possibly a context to engage around. These peers are the individuals that will be these students’ neighbors, co-workers, and employers in the future.

Vocational education and instruction. Providing students with vocational education and instruction addresses the need to focus on employment while the student is still in school (Baer et al., 2003; Basset et al., 1997; Benz et al., 2000, 1997; Brown et al., 2006; Luecking & Fabian, 2000; Hasazi et al., 1985; White & Weiner, 2004). Vocational education can take many different forms including, but not limited to, community-based vocational instruction (Dymond, 2012; Inge et al. 2005; Pickens & Dymond, 2014; White & Weiner, 2004), community referenced instruction and in-school simulation (Ayers, Langone, Boon, & Norman, 2006;
Mechling & Ortega-Hurndon, 2007), participation in the vocational education curriculum (Baer et al., 2003; Mazzatti et al., 2013; Test et al., 2009), work-study programs (Hartman, 2009; Luecking & Fabian, 2000), and career awareness (Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997; Heal & Rusch, 1995; Mazzotti et al., 2013). During each of these experiences students have the opportunity to engage in and practice real work skills. When a student has access to vocational instruction and is able to learn job-related skills, then the student’s chances of finding employment may be improved (Carter et al., 2009; Wheeler, 2008). When a student lacks employment skills and meaningful job preparation, their chances of gaining employment are diminished in the views of both special education professionals and rehabilitation providers (Riesen, Schultz, Morgan, & Kupferman, 2014).

**Social skills instruction.** Individuals with disabilities require instruction in the actual skills needed in the work environment, but it is also critical that students develop “people skills” that will help them to interact with others as they attempt to gain and maintain employment (Benz et al., 1997; Carter et al., 2011; Chadsey & Breyer, 2001; Hartman, 2009; Mazzotti et al., 2013). These social or people skills include abilities in the areas of assertion, self-control, and cooperation (Wagner et al., 2005). A lack of social skills is a frequently cited barrier to employment (Benz et al., 1997; Chadsey, 2008; Riesen et al., 2014). Rehabilitation providers report that students are expected to articulate their own work preferences. When a parent or advocate takes on this role, it could affect the student being viewed as employable (Moon et al., 2011). Successful employment requires a student to interface with many different types of people and react in multiple types of social situations. Students need to learn skills that allow them to navigate the social expectations of the work environment (Benz et al., 1997; Hartman, 2008; Hughes & Carter, 2000)
**Self-determination and self-advocacy.** Self-determination and self-advocacy skills will be critical to students with disabilities in social and work situations (Bassett et al., 1997; Carter et al., 2011; Hughes et al., 1997; McEachern & Kenny 2007; Moon et al., 2011; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003) and have been identified as a predictor of post-school employment (Test et al., 2009). Specific instruction in choice-making (Hughes, Hwang, Kim, Killian, Harmer, & Alcantara, 1997), self-confidence and self-awareness (Strauser, Wong, & O’Sullivan, 2012), and problem-solving (Riesen et al., 2014) should also be highlighted as critical skills in any self-determination and self-advocacy skills instruction. Also, there should be a conscious effort to reduce a student’s dependence on one-on-one supports as they learn more self-determination skills and/or get closer to transitioning out of high school (Brown et al., 2006; Inge & Moon, 2010). This is because when students have a high rate of self-determination and self-advocacy they are able to act as the causal agent in their own life and advocate for their own needs (Wehmeyer, 2005). In addition, they are able to advocate for their own employment preferences, desires, and needs which is a skill desired by adult service providers (Moon et al., 2011).

**Employment before graduation.** One of the most advocated strategies to safeguard that students with disabilities successfully transition to gainful employment is to ensure they are employed by the time they leave high school (Benz et al., 1997, 2000; Brown et al., 2006; Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2011; Fabian, 2007; Mazzotti et al., 2013; McDonnell & Crudden, 2009; Moon et al., 2011). This may include working while the student is still in high school and/or having a job at the time the student exits high school. Experiences with internships, after school jobs, school-sponsored jobs, or summer work experiences all have the potential to help students learn job-related skills (Carter et al., 2009; Hartman, 2008). Students may even spend part of their school day being released from academics to participate in a part-time job in the community.
during school hours. These experiences are critical because having more than two work experiences while in high school is a predictor of employment (Benz et al., 1997), but working less than two consecutive weeks is a predictor of an unfavorable VR outcome (Hayward & Schmidt, 2000). When students have job-related experiences that assist them in the development of work-preferences and job-related skills they often are able to use these skills to better their chances of finding employment (Banks & Renzaglia, 1993; Blackoby & Wagner, 1996; Benz et al., 2000; Hartman, 2009; Test, Aspel, & Everson, 2006). This is because when an individual has had job experience(s) before transitioning they may be more likely to have greater knowledge of specific jobs and be more aware of the job demands and scenarios to which they will be exposed (Hayward & Schmidt-Davis, 2003).

**Other influencers of employability for students with disabilities.** Students need to be able present themselves appropriately and to move about the community safely and effectively in order to find success in employment. When students have instruction in self-management skills including knowledge of appropriate behaviors (Carter et al., 2011; Hughes et al., 1997; Moon et al., 2011), hygiene/toileting (Carter et al., 2011; Dymond, 2012; Eisenman & Celestin, 2012; Moon et al., 2011), safety skills, and communication, mobility/public safety (Moon et al., 2011) their chances of being viewed as employable increase. Skill mastery in these areas will allow an individual to interact with others and the world around them in an appropriate way. Closely linked to this is the need for job-seeking and work-preparedness skills, which are viewed as crucial by rehabilitation providers (Strauser & Berven, 2006). These skills are viewed as even more important than academic and recreation skills in the eyes of many rehabilitation providers (Moon et al., 2011). How well students are supported, and how much communication and
collaboration occurs when designing the students’ transition curriculum may also influence a student’s transition to employment success (Test et al., 2009).

Factors That Influence Employment Success

The curriculum and experiences that are provided to students while they are in school can greatly influence a student’s chances of gainful employment. There are also many non-school factors that influence an individual’s employment outcomes. These factors include variables related to the (a) student, (b) family, (c) program/service provider, and (d) community.

Student factors. Just as mastery of job-related skills (e.g. self-determination, self-management, community integration and mobility skills, career awareness and experience, problem-solving, and social skills) can have a large effect on the employment outcomes of individuals with disabilities, so can a student’s characteristics (e.g., gender, severity of disability). Females tend to fare worse and fail more in employment than males, who tend to have better employment outcomes (Benz et al., 1997; Hasazi et al., 1985; Miglione et al., 2012; Rabren et al., 2002). Also, students with less severe disabilities tend to fare better (Benz et al., 1997; Heal & Rusch, 19995; Moon et al., 2011) than their peers with more severe disabilities, especially those with intellectual disability.

The amount and sustained intensity of supports that a student needs may also impact his/her ability to be viewed as “employable.” The need for long-term, intensive supports negatively impacts the views of rehabilitation providers about the ability of an individual with disabilities to successfully transition into employment (Riesen et al., 2014). Severity of disability and need for long-term supports are not to be confused with initial support need. Wheaton and Hertzfeld (2002) found that when individuals with less severe intellectual disabilities, but higher
initial support costs and needs for services, received VR assistance it often meant the individual was more likely to be employed as compared to those with more severe intellectual disabilities.

The type of income supports an individual receives also may affect his/her employability. When individuals with disabilities receive public financial assistance (e.g., SSI-disabled, general assistance) it is often negatively related to entering competitive employment (Schuster, Timmons, Ciulla, & Mairead, 2003). However, receiving financial assistance in some other form (e.g. developmental disabilities funding, family trust) is a favorable predictor of services (Hayward & Schmidt-Davis, 2000). This may be because other forms of funding may be used and designated specifically to pay for support services (e.g., employment follow-up services) to allow the individual to be gainfully employed whereas federal disability benefits are to be used to pay for basic needs (e.g., housing, medical). Fear of losing benefits coverage, especially social security benefits, is a real fear of many individuals with disabilities (McDonnell, Hardman, & McDonnell, 2003; Wehman, 2006) and it can often seem like the system dissuades individuals who receive benefits from working (Degeneffe, 2000).

**Family factors.** Family variables (e.g., knowledge, input, and participation) all may have an effect on a student’s chance of successfully transitioning to employment (Luft & Rubin, 1999; Moon et al., 2011). Parents (and other stakeholders) must be knowledgeable about the transition process and about services that may be provided to transition-age students. A lack of knowledge about the services that are available in the community, the job requirements of desired jobs, and the available supports, on the part of both students with disabilities and their parents/advocates, were high impact barriers to the successful transitioning of students with disabilities (Riesen et al., 2014).
Parents must not only be knowledgeable, but they must use this knowledge to improve planning for their student’s life after high school. When parents are actively and positively involved in their student’s IEP/ITP meetings and planning for transition then the student tends to have a more successful transition into employment (and independent living; Sale et al., 1991). Participation and knowledge about the transition process are critical, but so is having positive, but realistic expectations about the student’s abilities and where those abilities will allow the student to work in the future (Riesen et al., 2014).

**Program/service provider factors.** While issues at the student and parent/family level can have an effect on the employment of individuals with disabilities, according to Luft and Rubin (1999) issues at the program-level present the greatest challenge in transitioning students to gainful employment. Butterworth, Gilmore, Timmons, Inge, and Revell (2007) stated that organization size, culture, and objectives often play the biggest role in the employment outcomes of individuals with disabilities. Specifically issues occurring around lack of funding/budget, time limitations, lack of knowledge, service provider motivation, and lack of personnel preparation for working with complex populations can be major barriers to the successful transition of students with severe intellectual disabilities. This is further complicated by the fact that individuals who require intensive planning and support to ensure job retention may hinder VR and CRP’s ability to have a high rate of successful closures (Degeneffe, 2000; Luecking & Luecking, 2006).

Social, economic, and professional conditions can be influencers of vocational decision making both at the adult service level (Gatens-Robins & Rubin, 2008) and within special education. The amount of resources available (i.e., time, financial, and personnel), as well as the social climate and culture, affects what service providers believe possible and acceptable. A lack
of funding and/or staff to develop jobs will have a detrimental effect on employment service provision to students with disabilities (Conley, 2007).

Both objective measures, such as type of disability that the organization serves, and subjective measures, such as perceived benefit of services, affect service providers’ decisions (Berven & Drout, 2012). Rehabilitation providers can be influenced by many different heuristics or cognitive shortcuts including availability (previous experiences that underline choice and decision), representativeness (stereotyping to believe that one characteristic implies another characteristic), or anchoring (decisions are made on first instincts; Berven & Drout, 2012). Falvey, Bray, and Hebert (2005) used think alouds with rehabilitation providers to look at their problem-solving strategies. The researchers found that all individuals used some sort of cognitive shortcut in their decisions about services for individuals with disabilities and that those in the job longer may have been more prone to bias. Often, the measures used by rehabilitation providers are subjective and based on experiences of the provider. Individuals tended to use their previous experience with individuals they judge to be similar to the individual being assessed. The outcomes they saw with the first individual often greatly affected their determinations about the individual being assessed. Providers were not attempting to be malicious in these judgments and tended to feel a duty to act in beneficent ways to empower individuals with disabilities to have the best possible outcomes in the least restrictive environment (Stebnicki, 2012). Providers desired to facilitate the rehabilitation process through the use of their unique set of skills and experiences to judge employability and to assist others to reach the highest level functioning.

The preparedness and transition knowledge of the counselor, as well as their own professional practice, may be a factor in their ability to assist transitioning students. Plotner, Trach, Oertle, and Fleming (2014) surveyed general VR counselors and transition-focused VR
counselors, and examined differences regarding their perceptions of (a) the importance of transition activities, (b) their professional preparation for aiding with transition, and (c) the frequency with which they engage with transition-age consumers. Both groups thought transition was important, but there were four differences between these professionals in their preparation to assist transition-age students with disabilities. Transition-focused VR counselors scored higher on (a) willingness to provide career preparation, (b) ensuring student access and success, (c) facilitating non-professional support and relationships, and (d) facilitating the allocation of resources. Significant differences between groups were found in their ratings of their preparedness and the frequency with which they engaged in transition activities. Rogan and Rinne (2011) found that when efforts are made to ensure that staff training and employment expectations emphasize the need for employment in integrated, competitive employment then students are more likely to transition into gainful employment.

The pre-service training that providers have received may also greatly affect how they make decisions about the employability of individuals with disabilities. The job roles of individuals who assist individuals with disabilities are always changing (Sale, 1991) and their training must also change. Confusion about how to best provide vocational services to individuals with severe disabilities is an issue that many practitioners, especially new practitioners, struggle with in both special education (Test, 2008) and in VR (Degeneffe, 2000; Lara, Kline, & Paulson, 2011). A lack of professional preparation can cause problems as providers assist students with disabilities to transition (Riesen et al., 2014).

Community factors. Factors that influence employment success within the community include community connectedness between stakeholders and employers, and economic conditions (Baer et al., 2003; Conley, 2007; Fogg, Harrington, & McMahon, 2010; Luft &
Rubin, 1999; Moon et al., 2010; Morgan et al., 2000). Not all of the variables affect each stakeholder group in the same way or to the same effect, but all influence the movement of transition-age students from school to employment.

Connections between stakeholders and employers are critical to ensuring that students with disabilities can transition into employment (Carter et al., 2009; Riesen et al., 2014). When students, their parents, and their teachers have an idea of what jobs are available in their community and what these jobs entail they can help the student gain skills and set reasonable employment goals (Riesen et al., 2014). Inversely, employers need to know about students with disabilities and what they have to offer to their organization. Employers who have students engaging in job-related tasks at their worksite are often more likely to hire individuals with disabilities to work in their business (Wheeler, 2008).

The economic and social conditions where an individual is seeking employment, as well as the national economic climate, largely affect a student’s ability to gain employment. If there are a reduced number of jobs available in the community then it is more difficult for individuals with and without disabilities to find employment (Inge & Moon, 2010). In fact, recent research has illustrated that frequently individuals with disabilities are more adversely affected by downturns in the labor market than are their peers without disabilities (Fogg et al., 2010). Also, economic and social conditions can have a large impact on employers’ reluctance to consider individuals with disabilities as potential employees (Conley, 2007). If there is a high demand for jobs, then employers may be less likely to compromise on job descriptions and less willing to job-carve or make non-required accommodations.
Perceptions of Rehabilitation Providers

Many factors may impact the transition to employment success of students with severe intellectual disabilities, but whether or not these students receive services to help them transition will, at least in part, come down to the judgments of rehabilitation providers. If these providers believe that a student has accessed and mastered the skills and experiences that will allow them to find employment success then the student is more likely to receive services if all other factors are favorable. In order to understand the provision of employment services to transition-age students with severe intellectual disabilities it is critical to understand the perspectives and views of rehabilitation providers.

Rehabilitation providers consider a variety of factors when making decisions about the employability of a student with disabilities. Two research studies have investigated this issue. Riesen, Morgan, Schultz, and Kupferman (2014) examined the school to work barriers for individuals with disabilities identified by transition to employment services providers in one state. VR counselors, CPRs, and Utah-licensed special educators with expertise in transition to work and a minimum of two years of experience were purposefully sampled. A Delphi method was used to collect three rounds of survey data. In the first round, 46 participants were asked to provide demographic information and identify as many school-to-work barriers as they could including, but not limited to, family systems, school systems, agency policies and procedures, agency agreements, and community employers. This resulted in the identification of 230 barriers. In the second round the remaining 37 participants were asked to use a four-point Likert scale to rate the impact of 154 barriers that were grouped by 12 domain categories. Once the survey was closed, means and standard deviations were calculated and these means and standard deviations
were sent to all remaining participants in round three for them to consider while they re-rated the same 154 barriers.

Findings indicate the highest rated barriers to the employability of individuals with disabilities were a lack of (a) job related skills on the part of the student with disabilities, (b) appropriate involvement on the part of the student and their family, and (c) rehabilitation provider knowledge and collaboration. In particular, participants said students with disabilities often lack the employment related skills (e.g. work completion, task accuracy, punctuality, social skills, self-regulation), self-advocacy/self-determination skills, “soft” skills (i.e., job-related skills), problem-solving skills, and meaningful previous job training to be successful in employment. Also, parents and students have inappropriate expectations (e.g. too high, too low, too specific, unclear) and lack knowledge about (a) community resources, (b) educational and adult services, (c) how to access services, (d) available supports, and (e) the need to have long term funding in place. Finally, the study found that issues of (a) a lack of functioning and community transition teams, (b) naivety of stakeholders about job requirements, and (c) a lack of pre-service professionals’ knowledge about transition services were high impact barriers.

Moon, Simonsen, and Newbert (2011) surveyed 12 CRPs, all of whom provided supported employment services to individuals with developmental disabilities, about their beliefs regarding factors that might contribute to the employability of individuals with developmental disabilities. These authors specifically examined (a) what families need to know about eligibility and requirements, (b) skills that students need to acquire, (c) effective assessments and work experiences, and (d) recommendations for those who want to pursue post-secondary education.

The researchers found that CRPs reported they are better able to judge eligibility and serve transition-age students when the CPR staff understands the individual’s employment
interests and the individual has long term funding (e.g. developmental disabilities funding) to ensure job support and retention, previous work experiences, and self-management and self-care skills. Participants’ responses to open-ended questions further expounded on the skills critical for supported employment services and included self-advocacy, self-determination, safety skills, social skills, hygiene, communication, and travel training. Issues of negative behavior, poor hygiene, poor safety skills, and toileting issues were identified as specific behaviors that would prevent a student from receiving supported employment services. Participants reported that they never received SOPs about students’ skills and preferences, and that receiving an IEP was often the extent of their collaboration with school personnel. The recommendations that survey participants had for transition-age youth, their families and educators wanting to access supported employment through a CRP included knowing the difference between entitlement and eligibility services and how these switch during transition, the need to have long term funding, the importance of previous work experiences, and the need to fade supports as the student gets ready to transition.

Rehabilitation providers have identified many different factors that may impact the transition to employment success of students with disabilities, but there is still much that is unknown about the rehabilitation provider’s decision-making process. We know that there are clearly established barriers (e.g. lack of job skills and experiences, lack of stakeholder knowledge and understanding) to the employability of students with disabilities and to a certain extent whether these barriers affect decisions about the employability of individuals with disabilities. This knowledge is important to assisting individuals with disabilities to find employment, but more is needed. In particular, there is a gap in knowledge about how and why factors, both internal and external to the student, affect rehabilitation providers’ decisions about
the employability of individuals with disabilities. This is because primarily quantitative methods, usually surveys or predetermined lists, have been used to obtain feedback from these stakeholders and these methods do not allow for an in-depth understanding of how and why rehabilitation providers make decisions. Also, much of the research about rehabilitation providers’ views about employability has focused on individuals with less severe disabilities. This is problematic as supported employment services are to be prioritized for individuals with the most severe disabilities. More information is needed about why individuals with the most severe disabilities, especially those with the most severe intellectual disabilities, are not able to receive employment services. Finally, most studies about rehabilitation providers’ views are focused on the view of providers in a single state. The lack of successful transitions from high school to employment of students with severe disabilities is a national issue that deserves a study with a national scope.

**Statement of the Problem**

Students with disabilities, especially those with severe intellectual disabilities, are not successfully making the transition from high school to employment. Often they are not even being provided the option of competitive employment or the skills and experiences that would help them transition into employment. The recent federal mandate through WIOA 2014 that young people with disabilities must first try integrated employment has brought this issue of the lack of transition to competitive employment of individuals with disabilities to the national legislative forefront again. There is great hope that the employment outcomes of students with disabilities who are transitioning from high school to employment will improve as a result of this new legislation. While it may help improve transition-age students’ exposure to employment
opportunities, the determination of whether students with severe disabilities will be supported in competitive employment will, at least in part, come down to whether rehabilitation providers believe that students have accessed and mastered the skills and experiences that will allow them to find employment success, and rehabilitation providers have the capacity to assist the students. Students with severe intellectual disabilities continue to be unemployed and deemed ineligible for vocational services across the country. More information is needed about why students with severe disabilities are continuing to be left out and what can be done to stop it.

Two studies have been conducted to date that examine stakeholders’ perceptions about the skills and experiences that are critical to the employability of individuals with disabilities (Moon et al., 2011; Riesen et al., 2014). Both of these studies emphasized the need for students to have access to job-related skills, instruction, and experiences before they leave high school. Both studies also stress the need for all stakeholders (e.g. students with disabilities, their family members, school and rehabilitation providers) to be knowledgeable about students’ employment goals and how to achieve them in the transition process.

Individuals with disabilities are not finding success in community employment, and those with severe intellectual disabilities are faring the worst in this regard. Supported employment was originally developed for individuals with the most severe disabilities, but all too often, these individuals are denied supported employment services. Parents, service providers (school and rehabilitation), and researchers have provided feedback concerning employment barriers for young adults who have disabilities through primarily quantitative means. However, we do not know how and why these decisions are made. It is also unclear how, and if, these same barriers affect those students who have severe disabilities. Possibly the barriers to gainful employment may differ dramatically for those who have a severe intellectual disability in relation to students
with high incidence disabilities. In order to understand how decisions about the employability of students with severe intellectual disabilities are made and what factors are critical to a student’s employment success, more in-depth discussions with rehabilitation providers are needed. The purpose of this study is to (a) identify skills and experiences that rehabilitation providers believe impact the ability of students with severe intellectual disabilities to obtain employment services and (b) examine factors that influence the decision making process of rehabilitation providers about the provision of employment services to transition-age individuals with severe intellectual disabilities. This study has the potential to contribute to knowledge in both special education and rehabilitation regarding the skills, experiences, and factors that need to be addressed to ensure that students with the most severe disabilities can be successful in gainful employment and in life.
Chapter III
Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate rehabilitation providers’ perceptions about assisting transition-age students with severe intellectual disabilities to obtain employment. The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. What types of skills and experiences do rehabilitation providers believe impact the ability of students with severe intellectual disabilities to obtain employment services?

2. What factors influence the decision making process of rehabilitation providers about the provision of employment services to transition-age students with severe intellectual disabilities?

Qualitative methods were used in this study because they give voice and depth to the personal experiences of participants. They also allow for a systematic approach to understanding the nature and qualities of a particular phenomenon (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). Within qualitative methods, interviews were chosen as the primary source of data because the goal of interviewing is to bring forth the experiences, perceptions, and views of research participants (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Interviews have the ability to provide both the collective and individual story of this issue.

Researcher Identity

The analysis of all data came from, and may be biased by, the researcher’s own perspective. Within qualitative methods the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Just as the participants have deep-seeded beliefs that affect their views about the employability of individuals with severe intellectual disabilities, I also am deeply affected by my own experiences. I believe employment is critical to allowing all individuals to live an independent, self-directed life after they leave high school. I feel strongly that with
appropriate instruction, assessment, and training early in an individual’s life, there is no such thing as an individual who is too disabled to work. However, I have also seen and experienced instances where an individual has lacked appropriate training and instruction, leaving him/her unprepared for employment. This lack of appropriate preparation led me to doubt that the individual could “unlearn” less desirable skills and learn required work competencies given the time and resources that were available. My humanist training allows me to believe that all people can work. Conversely, my economist training also allows me to understand how it can be concluded that in certain circumstances the input does not equal the output when it comes to assisting individuals with severe intellectual disabilities to gain employment. All individuals can be employed if they possess competencies in technical skills (with or without accommodation) required to perform the job, the self-determination to advocate for themselves, job-related skills, and the social skills to allow them to work and interact with others in the work environment. However, when there are large deficits in one or more of these areas, then gaining and maintaining employment can be difficult. This is my belief, but it may not be the belief of all of those that were interviewed.

While my previous work experiences may influence my views about the employability of individuals with severe intellectual disabilities, these views and beliefs are also ever evolving. My work as an employment training and transition specialist assisting with individuals with varying support needs informs my knowledge about how rehabilitation professionals make decisions. In particular, it allows me to understand to a certain extent why they make decisions about how and when individuals can find success in employment. My beliefs are also greatly influenced by the past 4 years I have spent reading, writing, and conducting research on the topic
of how to provide individuals with disabilities the smoothest transition from high school to a meaningful self-directed life (and gainful employment).

My views continue to be challenged and informed by the literature, colleagues and mentors, and my professional activities and experiences in the community. I have tried to make a conscious decision to position myself in both the special education and rehabilitation counseling fields to allow me to understand and reside in both, but to never be completely settled in either. This was critical, as these two fields do not always agree on the “employability” of individuals with severe intellectual disabilities. Many individuals with disabilities exit secondary education under the impression that they have been provided the skills that will allow them to receive supported employment services. However, these students are often deemed to lack the abilities necessary to gain and maintain employment by rehabilitation counselors.

As I do not have professional certification in either field (i.e., teaching or rehabilitation counseling) and instead have had much of my experience as a “student” and/or outsider, I am frequently viewed as a learner by those in both the special education and rehabilitation counseling field. This is not a label with which I disagree; instead it is one that I embrace. This stance as a “learner” and “informed outsider” is of benefit to me as I conduct this research as it allows me to see the merit of both sides without being wedded to the philosophy of either. Individuals in both rehabilitation and special education have responsibilities to assist students with disabilities in finding employment success. Ultimately, special education and rehabilitation need to work together to see the merit in each other’s methods to make sure that students are acquiring these competencies and can find success.

My previous experience and views had the potential to affect my research in a variety of ways, but in particular, in the way that I designed and delivered my interview protocol. With this
in mind, efforts were taken to reduce my bias in data collection and analysis, and instead, to allow the participants’ own views to drive the research. To confront the effect that my own experiences had on my bias, an “interviewing the investigator” (Chenail, 2011) interview was undertaken. During this process I took on the role of a study participant while an assistant interviewed me using the interview protocol. I answered questions thinking about my role as a former rehabilitation service provider. This process allowed me to (a) identify my personal feelings, (b) appreciate the challenges of sharing on the topic, (c) bring forth my own overt perspective, (d) understand the vulnerability of the participant, and (e) identify my own assumptions (Chenail, 2011). This process made me aware of how my own experiences affect my views and how these views may affect how I may interact with participants. Therefore, in the delivery of my questions I attempted to be neutral in my reactions and responses to allow the participants to interpret questions based on their own experiences.

Any biases and reactions that I did have in interviewing were recorded in a reflexivity journal, in which I wrote before and after each interview. The purpose of this journal was to record attitudes, reactions and concerns that might bias my interpretations. I wrote in my journal before and after each interview, as well as each time after I re-evaluated the codes, categories, subthemes, and themes. I also consciously attempted to look for “negative” instances that conflicted with my own views and hypothesis to allow me to confront my own bias (Krathwohl, 2009). This was also accomplished through the use of peer debriefing in which the lead researcher met with a knowledgeable fellow researcher to discuss the codes, categories, and themes and how these reflected the research questions.
Participants

The target populations for this study were individuals who provide transition to employment services as part of their work with a state vocational rehabilitation office, community rehabilitation provider (including centers for independent living, nonprofit organizations, and contract service providers), or as a private rehabilitation provider. Participants who were members of the Transition Specialties Division (Transition Specialties) and/or the Job Placement Division (JPD) of the National Rehabilitation Association (NRA) were targeted. Transition Specialties focuses primarily on transition professionals. JPD caters specifically to those who assist individuals with disabilities in achieving gainful employment. Participants were chosen from these two divisions because the members included a national cross-section of rehabilitation providers from various states, organizations, and rehabilitation programs. Furthermore, by their membership, these individuals have chosen to distinguish themselves and enrich their professional practice. These individuals will be referred to collectively hereafter as rehabilitation providers.

The current presidents of both organizations were approached about using their members as the research sample population. Support was granted by the presidents (see Appendix A) and endorsed by the Executive Board of the JPD and members of the Transition Specialties Board. The NRA membership coordinator was contacted regarding membership rosters and informed that he had presidential and board approval to release them. All individuals who held either life or student membership were eliminated, leaving only the professional members (i.e., professional, new professional, organizational, and affiliate) as possible participants. Two hundred and fifty-nine individuals met these criteria of which 221 were professional members of
JDP, 25 were professional members of Transition Specialties, and 13 were professional members of JDP and Transition Specialties.

Purposeful criterion sampling methods were used to ensure that only individuals who were best suited to answer the research questions were sampled (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Cresswell, 2011). All 259 professional members of Transition Specialties and/or JPD were emailed information about the research study (see Appendix B). Individuals were invited to participate if they: (a) spent the majority of their work assisting students with severe intellectual disabilities to transition from high school to employment, (b) had been a rehabilitation provider for three or more years, and (c) worked as a rehabilitation provider in a CRP, for VR, or in private rehabilitation. Individuals who felt they met these criteria and were interested in participating in the study were encouraged to email the researcher to set up a telephone screening. Within this email they were asked to provide their name, telephone number, and a preferred time for the researcher to call them.

During the telephone screening (see Appendix C) the researcher briefly explained the purpose of the research, asked the individuals to describe their work duties, reviewed the selection criteria to make sure all criteria were met, and described the data collection procedures. In order to determine if an individual worked with students with severe intellectual disabilities the following definition of the term was provided: a disability that significantly impacts intellectual functioning causing it to be well below average and require extensive ongoing supports in life activities.

If an individual met the study criteria then he or she was invited to participate. Participants were asked about their availability for an hour-long interview, their preferred mode of Internet interview (i.e., Skype, Gchat, or phone via Skype), and appropriate contact
information (i.e., skypename, phone number, or google+name). This request for contact
information occurred at the end to of the screening.

The researcher also attempted to recruit more participants at the NRA National
Conference. She did this by having copies of a flyer (see Appendix D) at the poster she was
presenting at the conference and engaging individuals who came to the Transition Specialties
booth in the expo hall. Individuals could simply pick up the flyer and contact the researcher later,
but if an individual expressed interest while at the poster or table, then the researcher screened
the individual at that time, or at another time during the conference, using the screening protocol.
If the individual qualified as a participant, a time was set up for the interview. These individuals
may or may not have been members of JPD or transition specialties, but were interested enough
in rehabilitation to attend the national conference.

When 25 participants were not identified through the initial mailing and conference then
an email solicitation request was sent out to JPD and Transition Specialties members two and
four weeks post-conference. Through this initial screening procedure 26 individuals responded
with interest and 16 individuals were identified who fit the screening criteria and agreed to
participate. Unfortunately, four of these individuals did not follow through with an interview
leaving the researcher with only 12 successful participants identified using this sampling
procedure. The target number of participants for this study was 15-25. In an attempt to recruit the
desired number of participants a recruitment email was sent to all individuals who had expressed
an interest in the study (Appendix E) asking them to forward the recruitment email to individuals
that they thought might fit the study criteria. Individuals recruited in this way were again directed
to contact the researcher, and then a screening interview was set up to screen them for
participation per the methods explained above. Four individuals who met the study criteria and
participated in interviews were recruited in this manner. All individuals that were selected and completed an interview with the researcher were offered a $25 gift card voucher.

A total of 34 individuals responded to the researcher’s email and said that they were interested in participating in the study. Of these 34 individuals, 22 agreed to be interviewed and 16 completed an interview. Of the six individuals who failed to complete an interview, three were told by their supervisors that they were not allowed to participate in the study, two withdrew from the study for unknown reasons, and one had a health crisis and was unable to reschedule the interview prior to the conclusion of the study. Also important to note is that the researcher was told by a prospective research participant during data collection that there were organizations and entire states where rehabilitation providers are not allowed to participate in research without review and approval by ethics and legislative boards. This may account for the relatively low number of individuals who chose to participate.

The 16 rehabilitation providers that participated in this study represent a somewhat diverse group (see Table 2). Only three participants (19%) were male with the remaining 13 (81%) being female. Eight (50%) individuals worked at CRPs, six (38%) worked as state Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, and two (12%) had primary employment as a private rehabilitation provider. Nine participants (56%) had at least a Master’s degree with seven (44%) having a Master’s plus additional credit hours. Participants were pretty well split between rural (25%), suburban (44%), and urban (38%) regions with some participants responsible for providing services to individuals in multiple types of areas. Eleven (69%) of the participants were from the mid-west region with 8 (50%) coming from the states of Illinois, Iowa, and Indiana. None of the participants were recruited from the West Coast or the New England area.
Most participants used level of function to assist them in determining eligibility, with more than half using both level of functioning and IQ. None of the participants reported using only IQ.

Table 2

Demographics of Participants (N=16)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender (n=16)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>13</td>
<td>81.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (n=16)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>56.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Masters with hours</td>
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<td>43.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>43.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider type (n=16)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational Rehabilitation</td>
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<td>37.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Private Rehabilitation Provider</td>
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<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic Region (n=16)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Midwest</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>56.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast</td>
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<td>18.8</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Mid-Atlantic</td>
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<td>6.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rehabilitation Provider Geographic Class</td>
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<tr>
<td>Both IQ and Functioning</td>
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<td>81.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functioning Only</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interview Protocol

Two main areas of inquiry were addressed in the interview protocol (see Appendix F). The first area of inquiry was an examination of participants’ own beliefs about the curriculum
and experiences needed by transition-age individuals with severe intellectual disabilities to improve post-school employment outcomes. Within this area of inquiry there was specific focus on the skills and experiences that schools (and other stakeholders) can provide to improve the “employability” of individuals with severe intellectual disabilities. The second area of inquiry dealt with factors that impact the decisions rehabilitation providers make about employment services for transition-age individuals with severe intellectual disabilities. The interview protocol was primarily developed after a review of the literature on disability service professionals’ views of employment preparation, best practices in the field of transition to employment, and in consultation with national leaders.

Three types of questions were asked on the protocol as recommended by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1998). The first type was descriptive questions to solicit examples of normative language and decision methods of the participant (e.g., question two where participants are asked to speak generally about their experiences helping transition-age students with severe intellectual disabilities). The second type was structural questions asking how the participant orders and structures events and decisions about the employment potential of individuals with severe intellectual disabilities (e.g., question 37 where participants are asked to reflect on how the provision of further information affected their decision about the employability of an individual). Finally, contrast questions were asked to distinguish how individuals make choices regarding the employability of individuals with disabilities that are referred to them (e.g., question five where participants are asked to describe how they decided what skills hinder a student’s ability to be employed).

Before the interviews were conducted, a panel of experts in transition to employment issues and/or qualitative methods reviewed the interview protocol. Individuals with both content
and methodological expertise were sought because having experts with both types of knowledge enhances instrument development (Davis, 1992). Each panel member read through the interview protocol and provided feedback on whether the protocol was designed to appropriately facilitate answering the research questions (Siedman, 2006). Obvious weaknesses within the interview protocol were changed before piloting (Kvale, 2007). The protocol was then piloted with two rehabilitation providers who were not part of the sample. The participants were asked to respond to interview prompts as if they were research participants. One of these pilots occurred over Skype as a video chat and the other over Skype as an audio call. Both were audio recorded using Audionote and Voice Recorder Pro. In an attempt to ensure that the wording of the protocol was clear, participants were asked about the clarity of questions and wording, the appropriateness of questions in relation to the study’s purpose and possible interviewee reluctance to answer, and if there were any questions that were missing or should be revised (see Appendix G). This piloting also allowed the researcher to be more aware of how her interviewing technique enhanced and detracted from the interview process. An effort to understand the researcher’s impact on the interview process was also examined by the researcher when she engaged in an “interviewing the investigator” interview (described within the researcher bias section of this chapter). This was done to ensure that the interview questions were appropriate (Brantlinger et al., 2005) and the reliability of both the human instrument (the researcher) and the interview protocol (Seidman, 2006).

Data Collection

Setting-up interviews. Individuals selected to participate in the study were sent an email (see Appendix H) confirming the interview time. Attached to this email was also a consent form
that explained (a) the purpose of the study, (b) the requirements of the study, (c) the benefits and risks that could result from participation, (d) confidentiality of data, and (e) procedures for consenting to participate. Participants were prompted to respond to the email by returning the attached consent form with their name typed next to the statement “I consent to participate in this research” and “I consent to have my interview audio-recorded.” Also, attached to this email was a brief demographic questionnaire to gather information about participants and their employment. If an individual did not respond to the email after seven days, a second identical email was sent. Individuals could withdraw their consent at any time by simply withdrawing from the interview or contacting the researcher and requesting to withdraw. Participants were encouraged to print a copy of the consent form for their records.

A reminder email (Appendix I) was sent to each participant the day before the interview to confirm the date, time, and medium for the interview. In this email participants were also prompted to spend some time thinking about the traits and characteristics of the last three individuals with severe intellectual disabilities who were referred to them that they thought were unfit for employment. In particular, they were to think about why these individuals were unfit for employment and what evidence could be provided to change their mind about the employability of these individuals.

Interviews were conducted until no substantial new information was obtained and saturation was reached (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Saturation is the gold standard within interview research, but it is largely undefined (Guest, Bunch, & Johnson, 2006). Most qualitative research recommends a sample size with a range of 5 to 25 interviews (Cresswell, 2011; Guest, 2006; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Twenty-five interview participants were sought, but a
minimum number of interviews were set at 15. A total of 16 interviews were conducted and analyzed.

**Interviewing.** A single semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. Online interviewing (i.e., Skype, phone via Skype, or Google hangout) was chosen because it allows barriers of space, time, and resources to be minimized without having to forego the synchronous elements of an interview (Edwards & Holland, 2013; Hanna, 2012). Each interview began with an explanation of the purpose of the study and a brief description about the format of the interview. If the participant had no questions then the audio recorder was turned on with the permission of the participant. Both Audionote recording program and Voice Record Pro recording software were used to record the interview. In an effort to maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to label audio files (Brantlinger et al., 2005). The key for these pseudonyms was kept in the researcher’s locked filing cabinet in a separate room location from the audio files.

**Prompts and probes.** The protocol included over-arching questions with more targeted prompts to probe deeper into participant responses. Individuals were asked to reflect both on their experiences as a whole and two or three students who they had found ineligible for services. During the interview the researcher followed the interview protocol to ask probing questions to encourage the participants to further elaborate and clarify their views and experiences, while being mindful of participants’ responses. Where appropriate, the interviewer prompted the participants by asking for further examples or more detailed descriptions of what happened. The researcher’s attempts were aided by her attention to “red lights” where the participants used an unusual term or strong intonations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Many strategies were used to acknowledge participants’ answers including nodding, pausing, and repeating a significant word.
As recommended by Patton (1990), three types of probes (i.e., elaboration, clarification, and completion) were used to clarify the participants’ answers. When an elaboration probe was given the participants were asked to further discuss and possibly discuss more deeply something they had been saying (e.g., can you explain further?). When a clarification probe was given the interviewees were asked to reword or explain in a different way something that they had already said (e.g., can you tell me that again?). When a completion probe was given, the interviewees were asked if there is anything else they would like to add (e.g., do you have any further examples?).

**Flow and rapport in the interview.** Efforts were taken to make sure that the interview flowed in a relaxed, but logical order. The questions allowed for some flexibility in the ordering of topics to allow the interview to feel more natural. Also taken into account was the need to be mindful about (a) the focus of the inquiry, (b) what could be learned from the participant, (c) the time available for the interview, (d) the researcher’s relationship with the participant and the roles within this relationship, and (e) what the researcher “knew” about the topic (Edwards & Holland, 2013). The margins and white spaces of the interview protocol were used to take notes about topics to follow-up on later in the interview. This allowed for the researcher to maintain the flow of the interview by not interrupting the interviewee with questions.

Efforts were taken to build rapport and make sure that the participants were comfortable throughout the process. The first two questions of the interview were purposefully structured to be overarching questions that would prepare the participants for the content that would be asked during the interview and would also make the participants comfortable (Bailey, 2007). The interview was concluded with a “cool down” question to allow the participants to reaffirm what
they thought to be the most important things they discussed in the interview and to touch on any lingering questions or impressions (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

Post-interview. Immediately after each interview was completed the researcher saved the audio file under the number and pseudonym of the participant, and checked the recording. Each file was saved to a password protected folder on her computer and on a removable data storage device that was password protected. The researcher then listened to the audio from the just completed interview to ensure that no malfunctions had occurred and that all parts of the interview could be heard clearly.

Immediately after the interview the researcher wrote up her impressions of the interview in an interview reflection journal. Each entry in the journal was focused on the researcher’s thoughts about (a) what went well this time and ways to improve the interview experience next time, (b) the mood of both the researcher and the participant, (c) the tone of the interview, (d) her own bias, (e) ways to improve interviewing technique, and (f) what the most important information provided by the participant was in regards to the research questions. This journaling allowed the researcher to reflect on what was said and what transpired in the interview. Regular reflections allowed the researcher to examine how her social background, assumptions, positioning and behavior impacted her data and the research at large (King & Horrocks, 2010). This personal reflexivity also provided context later in the process (King & Horrocks, 2010; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) both in analyzing the data and in reflecting on the research process. Researcher reflection notes were kept in a locked filing cabinet.

Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed verbatim. The transcriptionists were provided typed instructions to ensure appropriate and uniform mechanisms for data recording (Brantlinger et al.,
The researcher reviewed these instructions with the transcriptionists. The instructions included making sure that all communications including partial words and placeholder phrases (e.g., um, ah) were included in the transcript, and placing a timestamp in brackets next to any text that was unclear. The researcher checked each transcription for accuracy by reading through the transcript while listening to the audio recording. In the event that a part of the audio recording was inaudible and not recorded in the transcription, the researcher’s notes were consulted to attempt to fill in missing data. Any data added after the official transcription was marked in red.

**Member checking.** The researcher developed a brief interview summary immediately after each interview by listening to the audio-recording of the interview two times and writing notes about what was said. Notes were taken in a word processing format to allow both the researcher and the participants to comment easily on the transcript. Summaries were organized by interview topics(s) with prompts and room for the participant to comment on the accuracy of the summaries for each topic (Appendix J). Each interview participant was emailed a copy of his or her interview summary along with a short demographic form to complete so the researcher could send the participant a gift card voucher. Participants were asked to verify and/or correct the content of the summary, and then return this feedback to the researcher. If the researcher had not received the returned summary sheet from a participant within 7 days, a reminder email (Appendix K) was sent. If the researcher had not received a response after 15 days, then a phone call (Appendix L) was placed to the participant. Once the summary was received, a $25 Visa gift card certificate was emailed to the participant as a thank you for their participation. Fifteen of the 16 interview summaries were returned. Most participants did not make any corrections to their transcript. The few participants that made corrections made clarifications to the wording of text.
About a third of the participants also used the summaries to add additional information that they wanted to make sure was captured in the research.

**Coding of transcripts.** Once the first typed transcript was completed and returned from the transcriptionist the researcher began text analysis. The text analysis procedures included development of codes, coding and recoding of data, followed by grouping codes into categories, further condensing these categories into sub-themes, and the development of themes (Cresswell, 2011, Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Initial codes were developed by the researcher and then collaboratively with the researcher and a research assistant using line-by-line text analysis (King & Horrocks, 2010). First, the researcher attempted to determine what was significant in the data by reading through transcripts to identify and label content relevant to the interview questions. During the first reading of each transcript the researcher read the transcript in its entirety and wrote comments in the margins with the intention of developing initial ideas about codes. Once the researcher had done this with the first eight transcripts she developed a primary list of codes and ideas that she saw emerging. Codes were grouped according to the stakeholder population to whom they referred (i.e., student, family, school, rehabilitation provider, community, all stakeholders) with a separate initial category for feedback about the WIOA question. She then passed this list on to the research assistant who was instructed to use these preliminary codes to spur her thoughts on coding, but by no means to direct or limit her coding process. The research assistant was to note new codes and themes that she saw emerging as she coded the first three transcripts. The researcher and the research assistant then met to discuss the emerging codes on the first three transcripts and discuss what each code meant and different ways it was used. The codes from these three transcripts served as the basis for initial codes in the codebook. These codes were
then used to code the next three transcripts. The researcher and research assistant then met again to discuss their independent coding of the data and further develop the codes.

The codes that emerged throughout this process were recorded in a master codebook (see Tables 3 and 4). This codebook included a list of codes at first by interview question and then by category, factor, and research question, a description/definition of each code, and could include examples of the code from the text, and inclusion/exclusion criteria (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Actual words and quotes from the transcript were used to represent the data whenever possible (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Quotes were used in the defining of the codes to give a sense of the character of the speakers and highlight important information they were trying to convey. In addition, the researchers’ thoughts about each code were recorded and dated (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The master codebook continually evolved and became more refined as the coding process continued and the researchers became more familiar with the transcripts.

Once the first six transcripts were coded, the codes from the transcripts formed the initial codes of the codebook and were sent to the dissertation chair for her review. The dissertation chair read through the initial codes to make sure that they were clear, descriptive, and not duplicative. She provided feedback about these codes to the researcher who reviewed the codes and feedback. The dissertation chair and researcher met to discuss the coding feedback so that both could gain deeper understanding about the codes and their meaning. The researcher and research assistant then met to collaboratively discuss the feedback and make decisions about how to integrate it into the existing codes. Codes were redefined and overlap was eliminated as the process progressed.
### Table 3

**Work Skills and Experiences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Job skills</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Initiation</em>: students ability to take initiative in a regular and predictable manner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Attending to job at hand</em>: ability and willingness to pay attention, respond to directions, respond to feedback, and perform the task in an organized fashion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Work specific skills</em>: skills that are needed for a specific job (e.g. cashiering, typing, or fine motor)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Quality of work</em>: whether student’s work is able to meet the needed standards for employment (includes students speed and stamina)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Job-related skills</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Concept of work</em>: understanding and adherence to the demands of work—including value of work, professionalism and work ethic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Customer service skills</em>: ability and inclination to be friendly, helpful, and have a good attitude</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Attainment of functional skills</em>: skills that are needed for independent living (including self care skills such as toileting and feeding, as well as community living skills such as community navigation and mobility)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Motivation/follow-through</em>: effort to do what needs to be done to achieve goal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Need for further pre-vocational training</em>: need for further training in skills areas to make students employable (preparedness)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Use of technology</em>: ability to use technology to improve their employability, technology is not required, but the students use and familiarity with technology is an advantage (e.g. to be tech savvy or to use tech to help gain skills, but not as a need)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Job seeking skills</em>: possession of skills needed to be successful in attempting to gain employment (e.g. application completion job inquiry, multiple means of inquiry)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Social skills</em>: ability to appropriately interact and get along with individuals in the work environment (these can often be cultivated by establishing a peer network and practicing social skills with peers)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Self-determination</em>: Students ability to be a causal agent in their own life (includes self-advocacy, self-confidence and self-awareness, problem-solving, self-management etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Table 3 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Vocational experiences    | - *Previous paid work experience*: real paid work experience before applying for employment services  
- *School or community sponsored non-paid work experiences*: non-paid work experiences that a student may engage in that lack the presence of “real” work stressor and expectations (simulation, CBVI, unrealistic job experience, Community-referenced instruction, volunteering)  
- *Job analysis opportunity*: student has ability to try or sample a job and see if they have a real aptitude for it (e.g. job tryout, job sample, assessment of demonstrated aptitude, or volunteer work)  
- *Chores*: work tasks that a student performs at home(often participants describe these as work skills) |
Table 4

**Stakeholder Factors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family influences</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Family involvement:</em> family</td>
<td>• <em>Parent buy-in:</em> parents’ level of being on-board with the transition process as it is being implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are active and invested member in the transition process</td>
<td>• <em>Refusal of services:</em> the student or their family refusal of adult services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>Family trust:</em> degree of trust in other individuals to work with their loved one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>Family availability:</em> degree that parents and family members make themselves open for meetings and planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>Working the system:</em> individuals are using the support system available to the detriment of the student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>Family Input:</em> degree to which family members express a preference and active voice in the transition planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent impact:</strong> families</td>
<td>• <em>Presence of a role model:</em> person who demonstrates for the individual what the most appropriate path</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effect on the student who is</td>
<td>• <em>Family support:</em> level that family are supportive of the student and their goals, and the planning to achieve these</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transitioning</td>
<td>• <em>Push for independence:</em> the degree that family (especially parents) try to encourage and promote independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>Home expectation:</em> effects of differing expectations between home and school/community environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family resources:</strong> resources</td>
<td>• <em>Family assets:</em> family’s financial and social resources that may be used in helping student transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that can affect the family’s</td>
<td>• <em>Fear of losing funding:</em> effect of fear of losing benefits on preventing students from working (which may be a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ability to assist their family</td>
<td>sources of income for the family)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>member in having a better</td>
<td>• <em>Parent knowledge:</em> parents are knowledgeable about the transition process and the adult service system, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transition</td>
<td>• <em>Ability to use funding:</em> funding is available to the individual and their families to help with the transition to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>SES:</em> effect of families disposable income on their abilities to assist their loved one who is transitioning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
### Table 4 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family influences (con’t)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Family dynamic:** how individuals and things within the family interact with each other and the outside world | • *Role of mother:* mother plays a major role or is the influencer in the life & transitioning of the student (both good & bad)  
• *Culture:* Families is from a diverse ethic and/or linguistic background  
• *Influence of a sibling:* a sibling takes on a significant role in assisting (or hampering) with the transitioning of a sibling |
| **School factors** | |
| **School stakeholder issues:** school staff related factors in the employment preparation of individuals with severe intellectual disabilities | • *School personnel knowledge:* expectation and thoughts about student future and the resources that will get them there  
• *School personnel buy-in:* school is invested in helping student transition and doing so with the available resources  
• *Teacher effort/ motivation:* degree that the teacher is motivated or enticed to do things. |
| **School provisions:** whether a school or program is seen by rehabilitation providers as providing appropriate services to adequately prepare students for employment | • *School resources:* the financial, physical, and personnel resources that exist within a school  
• *Appropriate school-based preparation:* degree a program is seen by rehabilitation providers as adequately preparing the student for employment (IEP goal, curriculum advocated, services and experiences provided) |
### Table 4 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Support needs:** level of assistance a student will need to be successful
  - *Inappropriate behaviors:* level of workplace and/or social behaviors that allow individual’s to find success in employment environments (e.g. danger to self, defiance, immaturity, manipulation motional control, behaviors related to disability)
  - *Needs outside of Voc. Realm:* a student’s need for something outside of the vocational realm that needs to be taken care of before the student is ready for employment may include MH, housing etc.
  - *High level of support needed:* mention of the students need for a large amount of support (often discussed as the student needing 1 on 1 (constant) or nearly)—could be need for transfer, behavior, prompting
  - *Need for extended /long-term supports:* Mention of a need for supports by the individual beyond those provided by VR (or any adult service provider) that would be required for the job
  - *Functional communication:* degree to which a student has a way to communicate and express themselves to interact with other (AAC, need for translator)
  - *Natural support:* degree to which supports on the jobsite or in the environment that are naturally occurring and may serve as an aid to the worker (e.g. coworkers, signage)
  - *Type:* discussion of the type of disability that an individual has as affecting employability . . . .usually followed by a listing of the disability that the speaker is identifying. More of a description of the type of disability and how it impacts functioning verses a bias about “individuals with __” (Physical, MH, Sensory, Medical, Eligibility)
  - *Cognitive functioning:* ability to process and interact with environment, and severe limitations in functioning in the employment environment (Academic ability, Need Visual Support, rote, single task, sequence)
  - *DD funding:* funding for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities to support them in life activities
  - *Governmental Funding:* SSI, SSDI etc. that and individual received to supplement an income
  - *Ability to be safe in the community:* degree to which an individual can be in the community without causing themselves or others to be in danger (naïve)
Table 4 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Student factors (con’t)**

*Major life change:* a significant life event that effects the functioning and view of an individual

- **Trauma:** a significant life event that is so severe that it negatively impacts most functioning including that needed for successful employment
- **Change in family circumstance:** the shifting of the way an individual interacts with their family on a daily basis (e.g. move to group home, foster care)
- **Timeline:** where the individual is at in their transition planning and process often leading to a change in or lack of continued supports and/or services
- **Late onset of disability:** disabilities that are identified or presents themselves self after puberty, often mental health
- **Regression:** Further limiting of functioning or loss of skill that effects employment

**Community factors**

*Employer issues:* employer related factors in the employment of individuals with disabilities

- **Employer relationships:** established histories of positive working relationships between employer and service providers
- **Use of extended services and natural supports:** degree to which the employer is willing and able to support a student without intervention from a service provider
- **All students must try integrated employment by 25:** employer related effects of having individuals try integrated employment before being placed in a more restrictive setting
- **Employer openness/buy-in:** willingness of the employer to give a student a chance at a job

*Location Issues:* geographic location (rural, urban) and its effect on supports and employment options that are available (may include job opportunities in a desired area and or job fit)

- **Transportation:** degree to which a student is able to use public or private transportation to get to employment and to which this transportation is available
- **Labor Market:** discussion of available jobs and hiring patterns locally
- **Funding and availability to use:** degree to which funding, waiting lists, and other means for provision of service are available and used to help individuals find and maintain employment

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Table 4 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community factors (con’t)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diversity and availability of services:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Existence of transition program: a separate 18-21 or transition focused program outside of the “typical” school program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Availability of community support programs (e.g. supported employment, CILs, sheltered employment): degree that there are community program that provide options &amp; services to individuals with disabilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Change in service provision and programming: a change in the way that services are being provided and access by those with disabilities, as well as service providers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lack of consumer use of available services: effect of an individual’s willingness and ability to use community resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community Knowledge and Openness:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Community understanding of disability: degree to which the community is familiar with disabilities and how the manifest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Openness to the employment of individuals with disabilities: degree to which individuals with disabilities are accepted as working members of the community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Accessibility: allowance for individuals to efficient and interact with the community to the betterment of all</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rehabilitation provider factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Caseload: size and manageability of individual caseload to which an individual must provide supports (even with a fluctuating caseload)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ability to backburner or use a waiting list: use of waiting lists to try to ensure eventual service provision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Funding/Service Structure: type of services the organization can provide and the type of funding able to be used</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• (Chief) Population served: the main population that the CRP, VR, individual serves (and therefore may have comfort serving)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Agency Resources: space, money, and people to assist individuals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Push to close cases/high numbers: need to close cases and have successful closures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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(continued)
Table 4 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rehabilitation provider factors (con’t)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Individual provider issues:</em> individual services provider factors that affect how and when they provide services to individuals with severe intellectual disabilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Openness:</em> The degree to which the service provider is able and willing to see other view points and options other than their own and/or those that what would stereotypically be expected</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Previous experience:</em> degree to which an individual’s previous experiences effect their view about the employability of an individual coming to them for services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Student preference and knowledge of student:</em> understanding of the student, their skills, and their support needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Confidence in own knowledge/skill set/reputation:</em> service providers’ level of comfort with appropriately addressing the needs of students with disabilities with whom they work while maintaining their reputation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The researcher and research assistant used the new and improved codes to independently code the remaining transcripts. The researcher continued to help develop and define these initial codes through discussion and evaluation with the research assistant. They met twice weekly to review one or two transcripts that they had each coded independently. During these meetings, the researcher and research assistant reviewed the transcripts line by line. In the event that there was disagreement about a code, or a new code was thought to be emerging, the researcher and research assistant discussed the data until there was agreement. When all transcripts had been coded and no new codes emerged the codes were considered finalized.

Once all interviews had been transcribed and coded, and the researcher and research assistant had met to discuss all transcripts and codes, the researcher read through each transcript at least two more times to make sure that all codes were applied uniformly. In the event that the researcher was unsure if a code was applied uniformly she discussed it with the research assistant until it was clear.

Once the codes had been finalized, all of the data had been coded, and consistency of code application had been ensured, the codes were collapsed into categories. The purpose of this categorizing was to begin to group codes according to the stakeholder factor to which it related. Attempts were made to group codes that “hung together” in a meaningful way. However, attention was also paid to codes and categories that seemed to deviate from meaning seen with other categories. There continued to be on-going discussion between the researcher and the research assistant as the data were collapsed. The research assistant took an active role in working with the researcher to review and confirm the reduction of data.

Once the codes had been split into categories the dissertation chair was provided the codes (and definitions) and categories in a chart. The chair and the researcher met to discuss the
categories and ensure that groupings were consistent, meaningful, and inclusive. Discussion also focused on the themes and subthemes that were emerging.

The researcher then further divided the categories by research question. Once all data had been grouped into categories by research question these data were reviewed to develop subthemes across the entire data set. Each of the categories was collapsed into a subtheme that represented the function of that category (see Table 5). These subthemes were then further collapsed into three broad themes that encompass the data. These two themes were then used to express the data.

Table 5

Themes, Sub-themes and Categories Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate expectations</td>
<td>• Denial/Unrealistic expectation: Family involvement, family impact, family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>resources, family dynamic, support need, job and job-related skills,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>vocational experiences, school stakeholder issues, school provisions,</td>
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<td>• Enable/Dependence: Family involvement, parent impact, family resources,</td>
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<td>• Inappropriate reinforcement of student: parent impact, family</td>
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<td>• Underestimation/protectionism: Family involvement, family impact,</td>
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<td>related skills, vocational experiences</td>
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<td>Need for effective collaboration</td>
<td>• Training needs/need for qualified service provider: family involvement,</td>
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<td>issues, individual provider issues, job and job-related skills,</td>
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<td>vocational experiences</td>
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Table 5 (continued)

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<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
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<td>Need for effective collaboration (con’t)</td>
<td>- Assisting those with the most severe disabilities: family involvement, family dynamic, school stakeholder issues, school provision, support need, major life event, employer issues, location issues, diversity and availability of services, community knowledge and openness, agency issues, individual provider issues, job and job-related skills, vocational experiences</td>
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<td>- Resources provision: family involvement, family resources, school provisions, support need, major life event, employer issues, location issues, diversity and availability of services, agency issues, individual provider issues, job and job-related skills, vocational experiences</td>
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<td>- Knowledge of community resources and movement from eligibility to entitlement: family involvement, family resources, school stakeholders issues, school provisions, agency issues, individual provider issues support need, major life event, community knowledge and openness, availability of services, location issues, job and job-related skills, vocational experiences</td>
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<td>- Information sharing (reports and assessments): family involvement, school stakeholder issues, school provisions, employer issues, individual provider issues</td>
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<td>- Blaming/Scapegoating: family involvement, family dynamic, school stakeholder issues, school provisions, employer issues, individual provider issues</td>
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<td>- Consistency of expectation and frequent/effective communication: family involvement, family dynamic, family impact, school stakeholder issues, school provisions, employer issue, individual provider issues, job and job-related skills, vocational experiences</td>
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<td>- Respect for others feedback/input: Family involvement, family dynamic, school stakeholder issues, employer issues, community knowledge and openness, individual provider issues, job and job-related skills, vocational experiences</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Stakeholder Partnership: family involvement, family resources, family dynamic, school stakeholder issues, school provisions, employer issues, community knowledge and openness, individual provider issues, job and job-related skills, vocational experiences</td>
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**Quality indicators.** Because this was an interview study efforts were made to ensure that the research subscribed to quality indicators for interview studies outlined by Brantlinger and her colleagues (2005). In an effort to select appropriate participants the researcher used a database of targeted individuals who would have specific insight into the research questions. Further efforts were taken to recruit appropriate participants through screening interviews to ensure that the participants were specifically qualified to answer the research questions. In order to ensure that the interview questions were reasonable they were developed from a review of the literature and
then were piloted with individuals who mirrored the professional qualities of the targeted research participants. Also, the researcher engaged in a mock interview to answer the interview questions using her background as a rehabilitation provider to gain insight into the relevance and answerability of the questions. In an effort to ensure that the data were collected and transcribed in an appropriate manner, two to three recording devices were used during interviews to ensure accurate audio recordings. Next, the recording was given to a transcriptionist who had been trained by the researcher on how to appropriately transcribe the interview to ensure it was verbatim and accurate. Lastly, efforts were taken to ensure that participants’ responses were represented not only accurately, but in a sensitive and fair manner in the report, and to ensure that participant’s confidentiality was also respected.

**Credibility and trustworthiness.** Trustworthiness and credibility of the data are critical in qualitative research and so multiple measures were taken to enhance the integrity of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, peer debriefings were used to ensure reliability and limit interpretive drift. In the event of any disagreement in coding or interpretation of the data, the researcher and the research assistant discussed the issue until agreement occurred. This collaborative work helped to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Second, the researcher’s personal views and biases were identified and monitored many times prior to and throughout data collection through use of exercises such as the “interview the investigator” task (Chenail, 2011) and the researcher’s journaling after interviews (Emerson Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Third, member checks were completed which allowed the participants to confirm or correct the researcher’s findings (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Fourth, the procedures for data collection and analysis were clearly outlined and systematically followed. Finally, matrices were developed to organize the coded data that fit within each category and theme. This allowed
commonalities and outliers within categories and themes to become more visible, thereby allowing the researcher to re-examine the consistency and credibility of the coding.

Table 6

*Phases of Data Collection and Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Phase</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Email potential participants from the listserv</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Screen interested participants and set-up interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Conduct interview(s) and send reminders to get more participants</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Create interview summaries and send to participants, send audio file for transcription</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Upon receipt of completed interview transcripts begin coding of documents</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Break codes into categories, sub-themes and themes and then place in matrices</td>
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Chapter IV

Findings

There are many skills and experiences that participants believe are critical to determining whether students with severe intellectual disabilities receive employment services. Access to these skills and experiences, and ultimately employment services, is dependent on additional factors related to the student, family, school, service providers, and community. All of these factors impact the ability of students with severe intellectual disabilities to obtain employment.

Before presenting the findings it is important to note that participants’ definition of “severe intellectual disabilities” varied. Prior to the interview the researcher described the definition that would be used for this particular study and discussed the meaning of the definition. If the researcher was ever unsure that the target student being described did indeed have an intellectual disability, the participant was directly asked if he/she was describing an individual with intellectual disability. As long as the participant affirmed that he/she was discussing an individual with an intellectual disability that he/she considered severe, the discussion of that student continued. The researcher’s view of the individual as having a severe intellectual disability was not the deciding factor as to whether the data were retained for analysis; it was the participant’s view of the individual as having an intellectual disability that was severe enough to impact the student’s receipt of employment services that dictated whether the data were retained. There may be disagreement about whether all of the students discussed had a severe intellectual disability; however, the participants believed that each student’s disability fit the researcher’s definition of “severe intellectual disability,” and in the interest of fair data representation that was respected.
 Needed Skills and Experiences

Participants were queried to identify a variety of skills and experiences that they believed impact a student’s chances of obtaining employment services. In particular, participants were asked to reflect on two or three students with severe intellectual disabilities that they had denied for employment services and identify what hindered the student’s ability to be employable. They were also asked to identify the top three skills and experiences they believed were most essential for students to acquire in order to obtain employment services. Clear categories emerged of skill sets and experiences that come together to make a student “competitive enough” to be eligible for employment services. Job skills are the technical skills needed to complete a job. Job-related skills are the skills that allow an individual to obtain and maintain employment (e.g., self-advocacy skills, social skill, concept of work). Both of these are important in the eyes of the rehabilitation providers interviewed in this study. These participants agreed that often the best way to obtain these needed skills is through vocational experiences of some kind. However, there was some disagreement about which types of vocational experiences are the most beneficial and valid in obtaining job and job-related skills.

Job and job-related skills. It is not just one job or job-related skill that students need to be able to present to be eligible for services. It is the accumulation and intermixing of skills that make an individual employable. One participant spoke for many of her colleagues when she described what a student needs as, “competitive performance in terms of production speed or quantity of work.” She also synthesized the main issues that interfere with employability including, “work related behaviors primarily in terms of distraction, and sometimes in terms of socialization, inappropriate socialization or just lack of familiarity with work-related behaviors.” In the opinion of the majority of rehabilitation providers who were interviewed, mastery in most, if not all, of these areas is needed for a student to find success in employment.
First and foremost, mentioned most often among the participants, was that students must want to work and have a realistic concept of work and their relationship to it. This research elicited frequent statements like, “a lot of times it’s just they are not ready to work and don’t want to work yet.” A desire to work was frequently described as a student’s “biggest strength” and a failure to “develop that work ethic” was described as the biggest barrier to a student’s receipt of employment services.

Individuals seeking employment must understand the demands of work and be able to express, in some way, their goals and how they fit into the realm of employment. The phrases “motivation and follow-through,” “work ethic,” and “professionalism” came up frequently in interviews when discussing the student’s need to know about and be able to convey their understanding of the meaning of work. As one participant put it, a “good work ethic is very important for these students, I don’t care how well functioning they are if they have a good work ethic that’s paramount.”

The ability to communicate and interact appropriately with others was mentioned by every participant in one way or another. The capacity to express oneself in an appropriate and meaningful way was identified as a skill area that can make or break a student’s eligibility for employment services. Included within this skill set are social skills, self-determination skills, and customer service skills.

Participants identified social skills (i.e., the ability to appropriately interact and get along with others in the work environment) as one of the most critical skill areas for employment. Though two participants did make note that there are a lot of people (without disabilities) who do not get along or interact appropriately with others in the workplace, the general sentiment was that social skills are “the most important things” or “probably my 1, 2, 3, and 4” to getting and
maintaining a job. This is because they are what “tend to be those things that get people in trouble the most.” One participant described the value she places on social skills and being able to get along with others this way:

Those are some of the top reasons why they are getting fired or not being successful on jobs. I know they don’t know how to interact in those settings with adults or . . . they say things that they don’t realize are inappropriate but yet they are . . . or not knowing when to end conversations or when it’s not an appropriate time to talk or blowing up . . . so something like that.

These social skills that help individuals communicate and get along with others in the environment were also enhanced when the student had customer service skills, meaning they had the ability and inclination to be “helpful,” “personable,” “friendly,” “empathetic,” and have a “good attitude.” Each of these characteristics was identified multiple times by participants as a positive for a student who was pursuing employment. Along with the ability and willingness to help others, numerous participants also identified the need to be able to help yourself by advocating for yourself and your needs. These and other skills in the area of self-determination, including self-direction, self-awareness, and problem-solving were identified by participants as critical in their decisions about whether to provide employment services. This “need to apply an understanding of their impairment and how that affects work,” or be “aware of what his disabilities were and the impact of his abilities” were listed as critical skills by numerous participants.

Students need to be able to interact safely, efficiently, and effectively with others in the work environment. These job-related skills are things that the employer does not want or expect to have to teach individuals who apply for jobs. In order to be viable for employment, and employment services, these skills have to be mastered before an individual can find employment. In the words of one participant:
It’s not the job—they [employers] want to be able to teach you the job. They don’t want to teach you all those other things that you should already know coming into a job. So, with the fact that you should be on time, the fact that you need to work as a team with your team co-workers . . . you know all those soft skills are, are absolutely, absolutely vital to employers. Employers don’t want to have to teach you that.

Also, most participants agreed that, though employers are willing to train employees on some aspects of the job, they also expect that individuals arrive with some requisite job skills that enable them to perform the job for which they have been hired. One individual put it this way, “first and foremost I consider the skill levels with which they bring to a job . . . where are they at in terms of vocational skills that apply to different types of work.” Many participants introduced quality of work issues of a lack of “strength and stamina,” “work speed,” and ability to meet a “competitive production standard” as reasons why individuals were not able to gain employment services. If a student’s quality of work was not “sufficient for an employer need or employer expectation” in the eyes of the rehabilitation providers then the student was perceived to be ineligible to receive employment services.

Participants noted that it was to a student’s advantage to have specific work skills in the field in which he/she is attempting to obtain employment. These skills may include, for example, “cashiering,” “typing” or “fine motor precision” in tasks. A few participants identified these specific job skills as areas in which students need pre-vocational training before they seek employment. However, many times rehabilitation providers did not identify specific work skills that were needed and instead just stated that further pre-vocational training was needed in targeted work areas in which students wanted to work before they could be considered for employment services. Other job skills affecting the student’s ability to be considered for employment services included the students’ ability to initiate work tasks, pay attention, respond to directions and feedback, and perform the task in an organized fashion. In other words, students needed to learn to “attend to the job at hand.”
More than half of the participants referred to the importance of a mastery of basic functional independent living skills. These skills include both self-care skills such as hygiene, dressing, and medicine management, and community living skills such as community navigation and mobility. Issues of “hygiene,” “appropriate dress,” “safety,” and “mobility” were all issues that came up again and again in interviews. When students had these skills it was viewed as a great asset to their employability and when students did not have these skills it was to the detriment of their employability. Some participants asserted this issue must be resolved before employment can be considered.

Job seeking skills such as being able to complete an application, use multiple means of inquiry to obtain information about job possibilities, and present oneself for an interview in an appropriate manner, were highlighted by a few participants. One participant believed that these job-seeking skills could be enhanced if the student has the ability to use technology including to “use Google maps,” “go to the library,” or “use a computer to check email.” A few other participants indicated that technology skills can be used not only to search for a job, but also to enhance a student’s skills on the job.

The majority of providers interviewed wanted to give individuals the opportunity to work, as this quote demonstrates: “obviously you want to give them every opportunity to demonstrate that they can work . . . before you have any assumptions that they can’t or to pigeon hole them into a specific field or type of job.” However, many expressed that if an individual does not want to work, providing services would be a waste of the providers’ time and resources, and “taxpayer money.”

**Vocational experiences.** Rehabilitation providers advocated many different types of vocational experiences as positively impacting student’s ability to obtain employment services.
A few participants believed that it was good enough for students to have “any experience whether paid or unpaid that will shed light [about] what skills they have.” This could be a situational assessment or tryout, volunteer experience, or even a school- or home-based experience, as long as it allowed for observation and the acquisition of skills. Other participants believed that paid work was the best; these participants felt that for some students it is the only way to assess job and job-related skills. Some other participants were not willing to say that real work experiences are the only way to obtain skills needed for vocational services, but most still felt that they are a critical experience that an individual must have before attempting to transition. It does not have to be a prolonged work experience, “just some experience at work” or “at least one semester” will allow the individual to understand work and their place in it and greatly improve the views that a student could be successful in employment and receive employment services.

It was generally agreed that students must “demonstrate an aptitude [for work] and not just a stated interest” and that “goals need to be grounded in more than an interest survey.” Students can demonstrate this aptitude in many different ways. The most common way discussed was through situational assessments or job tryouts that allow providers to observe students and “get a baseline” to “see if [s]he can grow.”

These observations in work environments are critical because they allow students to demonstrate an ability and preference for work, and they positively impact providers’ views that students will be successful in employment and should receive employment services. Documentation of these vocational experiences can also provide rehabilitation providers with an idea of the vocational areas in which the individual might be interested, and the potential skills and aptitudes the student might possess.
Participants believed that vocational experiences could happen in both real and simulated environments. Simulated jobs commonly identified in the school environment included experiences in the cafeteria, cleaning, and as an aid to the teacher or the nurse. Some participants remarked that schools should be providing more school-based work experiences because there is a lot of “lost opportunity for work experience within the schools.” A few participants also mentioned job-tryouts and assessments that they themselves conducted on-site at their agency. Often times these assessments were done in a safer, more sterile environment. If the student could not perform in this environment then participants had doubts about how well the student would be able to perform in the real environment.

Many participants talked favorably about community-based job experiences organized by the school or community providers such as summer work programs, Project SEARCH, or the STEP program. Each of these transition programs was highlighted as an experience that was likely to have a positive impact on providers’ decisions. In general, participants felt that these experiences were constructive and positively impacted a student’s chances of receiving employment services. However, often times these job tryouts occurred in jobs stereotypically found for individuals with disabilities such as cleaning, stocking, or childcare.

Students’ community experiences also often included volunteer experiences. A few participants mentioned these experiences as a way to provide students with valuable work experiences that allow them to hone their skills and identify work preferences. One participant even went as far as to say that volunteer experience is enough and that work experience outside of a volunteer setting is “overvalued.” This participant believed that she could get enough information about students from having them volunteer in a less high-risk environment. These volunteer experiences could be sponsored by the school or setup by parents or other
stakeholders. It is just important that these experiences provide the individual with naturalistic work experiences and expectations and allow for observation and documentation.

Some participants also believed that home-based work experiences had an important role to play in helping students obtain employment services. A few rehabilitation providers also stated that they believed that the home environment was often underused for job experiences, and that if a student reported doing chores it may positively impact the providers’ view of the student and their fit for employment services. Chores provide students with a variety of vocational experiences in areas such as cooking, cleaning, and maintenance, as well as job-related skills such as self-determination and initiation. When done appropriately, chores can help students develop vocational skills. As this participant states, “even talking about what skills they have at home—so you know if they’ve done dishwashing at home, is that something they like is that something that they can do in a job.” Participants noted that chores are often omitted from the list of job experiences provided to rehabilitation providers.

While agreeing that it is good that schools are making efforts to expose students to vocationally oriented experiences, a few participants thought these experiences often do not provide student true working experiences with naturally occurring stressors and expectations. This is because “the jobs at the high school really (are) not real jobs, not like you’d see in a community in a competitive job.” Only providing these experiences is insufficient. As one respondent put it, “you don’t graduate a student with no work experience into the community just working in the high school—that is not good.” Another participant elaborated on the value she places on paid work:

I am not talking about the made up job in high school. I’m talking about a real competitive job. I don’t care if it’s a Little Caesar’s, McDonald’s, Pizza Hut or wherever it is. Just so that the person has a supervisor, they have to get to work on time and come to breaks on time, and do the job. That’s important. That experience is important.
Students do not need to possess all of the skills and experiences listed above in equal measure, although it would helpful. The more skills and experiences a student has the ability to access, the better their chances of finding success in employment. This is why many participants believed that changes within WIOA to increase funding for transition and require individuals to try integrated employment should lead to more skill development and vocational experiences.

Stakeholder Factors

A student’s ability to access skills and experience does not occur in a vacuum. There are other “factors” that impact access to skills and experiences, as well as rehabilitation providers’ views about a student’s employability. Five factors emerged from this study including student, family, school, rehabilitation provider, and community.

Student factors. Participants agreed that the student should be at the center of all decisions about his/her employability. They felt that a student’s chances of receiving employment services were impacted by (a) their personal support needs and (b) major life changes. Participants considered both of these areas when making decisions about employment services.

Support needs. The level of assistance that a student will need to be successful is one of the first things that every participant identified as an area of consideration. Participants reported that they “try to look at the whole person,” but within this they examine the (functional) limitation of the students, and whether accommodations can be made in a reasonable manner. The “nature of the limitations” and whether they are “so (significant) that it’s not likely for them to be able to work in a competitive area” or whether it is “much lower than the standard” are considered in decisions about providing services. Participants reported getting this information
from the students “psychological,” “service plans,” and reports and evaluations from schools, volunteer experiences, previous employers as well as providers’ observations of individual’s vocational experiences. Limitations must be examined in a whole host of areas as listed by this participant: “mobility, communication, work skills, work ties, um, their interpersonal skills, uh their self-care and their self-direction.”

Students with severe disabilities need some level of support to obtain and maintain employment, but for many participants, requiring one-on-one or near one-on-one support was a barrier to receiving employment services. If students need “a lot of hand holding,” “constant supervision,” “intensive job coaching,” or “constant redirecting,” most participants felt it would prevent them from making recommendations for employment services. One participant captured it this way:

I wanted to see it [motivation, follow-through, and work quality] so that she could stay on task and not have a one-on-one aide. That would tell me that she would be able to work in the community because an employer, I mean in supported employment, you can have a job coach but it’s usually for a very short period of time. It’s not for on the job.

The need for long-term ongoing supports following initial job training and the lack of resources to provide these supports was a major issue for many of the students that participants described. Lack of resources to provide long-term support was viewed as a barrier unless the “stars align” and students have the exact “right employer and right setting.” This rarely occurred, thus many participants were fearful about being able to support students with intensive support needs long-term.

In the absence of resources to fund ongoing supports, participants widely advocated the use of natural supports. The use of natural supports was not without problems. A few participants mentioned that there are some support needs that cannot be managed via natural supports (e.g., severe behavior challenges, hygiene). One participant was adamant that natural supports usually
do not exist and if they do exist they do not last over the long-term or outside of a small employer. One participant felt that using natural supports was against human and business culture. Another participant brought up the fact that at times other employees can “look down on” or resent the accommodations that an individual is provided because they “don’t think it is fair.” If there is a lack of willingness to provide natural supports it may stem from a community misunderstanding or experience interacting with students with disabilities.

Many participants mentioned that a student’s inability to be “safely in the community with limited supports” is a barrier to the participant being comfortable providing the student employment services. Students were considered unsafe in the community if they were “vulnerable” and “naïve” and would “go with anyone because they “have no stranger danger” or if the student could “act out” or be “violent.” Each was a real concern voiced by many participants.

Often it was not the severity of the student’s intellectual or physical functioning that was most challenging to address through supports. Supports were much more difficult to provide when students had limited communication skills or inappropriate behaviors. Behavior was a bigger issue for many participants than were issues of functioning. The students could do the work, but they are “set off” and you can’t work with them or as one participant put it: “they can do so much, it is just the behaviors.” It was a common sentiment that students were “not employable until you got a behavior plan in place.”

For many participants it was the presence of immature behaviors, acting younger than their “chronological age,” and lack of emotional control that prevented them from recommending students for employment services. One participant stated it this way: “you know he acted very young . . . umm he was probably like 21-22, he probably acted more like he was
about 13 years old, maybe even younger than that.” Another had this to say about a participant to whom she denied services:

If she didn’t like somebody or what not she would just shut down and become . . . she was very immature. She would go from like a junior high age to a reaction of a two year old . . . if she was mad because she didn’t like the topic she would act like a two-year old. I mean really temper tantrum, no eye contact.

A few participants reported that these behaviors would “come out” when the student was challenged intellectually or had to engage in problem-solving—both critical parts of most employment. Two different participants brought up the fact that students can be manipulative and refuse to complete skills for which they are fully capable. A few others complained that students were outwardly defiant in their actions and speech. One participant illustrated this point in the following example: “She was opening up food products even after she was prompted not to. She was defiant.”

Several participants discussed the need for students to have had “enriched social lives” and exposure to “different social situations” so that they know how to interact with others and behave appropriately in all environments, but especially work environments. Students need to have exposure to experiences that will allow them to learn how to behave and interact with others if they hope to be successful in employment. This participant sums this up nicely: “[I’ve] found that an individual’s personal experiences . . . and how they’re able to communicate and relate to their peers and others as a much . . . better indicator of whether or not they’re going to be able to be successful.”

According to many participants it was not the severity of one’s disability that caused an individual to be unsuccessful; it was the co-morbidity of disabilities or issues that caused students to be ineligible for work. These issues could include another developmental disability, or medical or sensory issues that were so pervasive that they prohibited successful employment.
There were often “a unique set of circumstances that beyond their intellectual disability created a situation of which they could not immediately go to work.” An inability to communicate with others or the inability or unwillingness of others to communicate with the student was also an issue reported by participants. Two individuals mentioned that even when individuals did have functional communication (e.g. ASL or AAC), others would not or could not easily communicate with the individuals.

This need for a student to have some functional way to communicate and be comfortable communicating that way is something that came up in interview after interview. It is “the one element that a person will need to have in some shape or fashion” according to one participant. Students need to be able to express themselves. It is a needed skill, but if it is not appropriately in place then it also becomes a support need that is prohibitive to students receiving employment services. This is because “most employers in the world of work want to be able to communicate with their employee and provide feedback.” This communication does not have to be verbal; it could be “sign language,” “flash cards,” a “communication device,” or “hand gestures, a computer, anything like that.” One participant summed it up this way:

[If a] person has limited ability to communicate, in any fashion, be it through augmented communication device or through sign language or some type of way that he can consistently communicate . . . if they do not have that particular element, then it’s going to be very difficult for them to be able to work in a competitive work environment, because eventually, the supports that vocational rehab provides fade.

**Major life change.** In discussing the students that they did not provide employment services to many participants reported it was because “they need to focus on other areas” before they can think about putting energy towards employment. This may often occur when there is a regression of an individual’s functioning. Participants reported that even though students might have had the appropriate previous training, if a student had increases in the effects of a disability, a regression, or the on-set of another disability, often mental health, then their eligibility for
employment services had to be reconsidered. The individual might have been “more capable when (he) first came to us” or were “on a path and was ready” and now they have to just “try to get them to a better place and back to where (he) needed to be.” A few participants mentioned that a mental health diagnosis during the transition years was an issue that deeply affected their decision about employment services. This was because there was often a regression of skills or additional new support needs and behaviors that had to be addressed with the onset of the new disability. Also, often it was not known if issues stemmed from the intellectual disability or the mental health problems and so addressing both issues was challenging.

At times participants reported that it was not an issue within the individual, such as a mental health diagnosis or worsening of a condition, but instead an external major singular event that might cause them to lose ground. Some of the events reported by participants included physical abuse, becoming wards of the state, having to leave the home, or a legal issue. Each of these events was said to cause behavior problems or a reduction in functioning that impacted the participant’s decision about the provision of employment services. Also, participants reported that where the individual was in the transition process and what their goals were affected their willingness to provide employment services.

Family Factors. The families of students with disabilities are the people with the most intense and prolonged engagement with them. The involvement, impact, resources, and dynamics of the family, especially of the mother, have a great impact on participants’ perceptions of the employability of students with disabilities. Each of these influencers had bearing on the skills and experiences that a student with a disability was able to access and in turn, influenced the decisions participants made about the provision of employment services.
Thus, family factors are critical, but particularly throughout the transition process. As one of the participants mentioned:

[Y]ou know the people that are more placeable regardless of their disability status, they tend to have supportive families or supportive group home staff . . . half of them have a real supportive family and you know you’re able to get a hold of them and communicate with them very well and then unfortunately about half of them don’t and that’s probably their biggest barrier.

**Family impact.** Most participants talked about the families’ impact on a student’s transition and how they considered this impact when making decisions about employment services. Families impact the decision-making process both directly by providing their input and expectations, and indirectly by the expectations and actions that they have of the student at home. The most often discussed aspect of family impact was the parents’ support of their child’s goals and their active planning to help their child achieve these goals. Closely related to family support of goals, was the family’s encouragement and insistence that the student be independent in as many areas as possible. One participant noted: “you know, this was a family. . . . [They] really wanted him to be as independent as he could and really made him learn.”

Independence was enhanced when parents and other family members served as role models, demonstrating appropriate behavior and actions, and encouraging students to improve their own conduct. A few participants talked about the impact of having other siblings at home, “training, supporting, modeling (and) nurturing” the student. Some discussed how a student’s behavior was impacted by a lack of consistency between what was expected at home and what would be expected at school or in the community. Another participant reported that it “comes or stems from the home” and that it is at times difficult because they do not know what is going on in the home and if the student has the same expectations at home. Usually when this was discussed it was to the detriment of the student. A participant summed up their sentiment of parent support this way:
I would say that the family support is one of the bigger ones. [You need] to make sure that they are getting the same messages at home that they’re getting at work in regards to being a good employee and having a strong work ethic, having the hygiene taken care of, having the timeliness. . . . family and environment [are] one of the biggest ways to make sure that the person will be successful.

*Family involvement.* Most participants emphasized that their decisions about a student’s employability are linked to the extent to which family members are actively involved and invested in the transition process. According to these participants, the level to which parents are in agreement with, and in support of, the transition process as it is being implemented, is vital to the decisions they make about a student receiving employment services. Family buy-in was evident when the family was willing to make themselves available for meetings and planning sessions. Many participants discussed that meetings frequently conflicted with the parents’ own careers and so showing up was a burden for parents. Despite this, the parents’ prioritization of showing a “commitment to meet” and participating in meetings was a marker of buy-in for many respondents. If planning for the student’s transition was not a priority, participants feared that facilitating the student’s transition to employment would not be either and respondents would be reluctant to provide services.

The families’ input, and the type of input they provide, can also have an impact on rehabilitation providers’ decisions. In general, most participants felt it was advantageous for the family to provide input into the transition process. A number of respondents noted that parents are very helpful in providing “understanding” and “perspective” about their child. This opinion on the value of family input was far from unanimous. Some participants stated that while parent feedback can be helpful, often parents share irrelevant information. They may also fail to share information about their child (e.g. behavior problems, previous encounters with the law) if they think it will hurt their child’s chances of qualifying for employment services.
Family dynamic. Family dynamic refers to how the family members interact with each other and with the outside world. Participants’ discussions about family dynamics focused on three major areas: (a) the role of the mother of the student with disabilities, including how she interacts with other people in the pursuit of services and the whole transition process, (b) the presence of siblings (with and without disabilities), and (c) the culture of the individual’s family versus the views of the service providers regarding the best way to provide services. Each of these was an influence in how rehabilitation providers decided whether the student would benefit from employment services.

Almost every interview included a discussion about the mothers of the target students, and their impact on the transition process and decisions about service provision. Frequently mothers were described as having a positive impact with participants describing mothers as “just great,” “a fabulous advocate,” or “amazing.” However, there were also many instances where the mother was described as “inappropriate,” “unrealistic,” or even “crazy.” Many participants described mothers that could not or would not “step back,” tried to supersede service providers, or went to the job sites and tried to interfere. Participants talked of a fine balance between being involved and advocating for your child, and enabling and hindering the student’s independence. An example of a mother’s proper balance is described here:

He’s doing very well, but you know I think his mother instilled a lot of that in him with the “(name of student) you can do this.” But, I think it took her backing off for him to really feel that he could do it on his own.

The presence of siblings was also believed to impact family dynamics and the transition process, and may even effect provider’s decisions about whether a student is ready for employment services. This is because often the presence of a sibling may affect whether family members have realistic expectations and available supports for the student with disabilities. Nearly a fifth of the participants talked about students who were twins or triplets. Frequently, it
was thought that because the other sibling(s) was functioning at a normal, or near normal, level the parents’ expectations for their child with a severe disability were not realistic. Meanwhile, another respondent mentioned a family with more than one child with a severe disability. In this circumstance the parents were overwhelmed with supporting both children to be independent and were limited in how much time they could spend working with others to ensure that their student received employment services.

Finally, the culture of a family occasionally had an impact on participants’ decisions about providing services. Culture included the ethnic, religious, and racial background of the family and the sensory heritage of the individual and their family (e.g., deaf culture). A few participants described problems interacting with families from ethnically diverse backgrounds, including a “lack of ability to communicate,” differing views on “medicine management,” and how to best support the student. At times, disability services did not seem to fit the “cultural norm” and this “holds up a lot of the process.”

**Family resources.** The final family factor identified as having an effect on providers’ decisions about employment services was family resources. Many participants believed that students with severe disabilities were more likely to receive appropriate employment supports when families had greater knowledge and financial resources. Many participants felt that the parents they worked with were knowledgeable about the transition process, but many also reported that some parents were not knowledgeable. Most all agreed that parents could always know more and increase their understanding of the transition process. As one participant put it:

[I] think they needed more information, more training, and guidance. I think that they need some sort of program whether it’s through the district or the county—something that can educate the families because you know they think they know it all. They’ve raised this child but there’s always something coming.
According to several participants, one area in which parents need a lot more knowledge and training is in understanding what to expect as their student gets ready to transition and how things will change as the student moves from eligibility to entitlement services. Participants said that parents need to “understand what it [the transition process] looks like,” understand the criteria for eligibility, and not view employment services as a “handout.” One participant put it this way:

They [families] really just thought it was a recap of what they’ve already learned in high school or something. So as far as the parent I have to say every intake meeting or IEP I sit in, they are just in awe at what they can actually do.

Many participants also mentioned the necessity of increased family knowledge about funding. Some mentioned that when students have the ability to use additional funding outside VR, especially DD funding, it helped their efforts in seeking employment. But a few reported that often students were reluctant to work because “SSI is paying the house payment.” One participant reported a parent threatening “if you get him a job while he is in school, I will pull him out of school.” Furthermore, if the family was in dire circumstances socially or economically it often did not bode well for the transition. When families were in lower SES groups, issues such as “phones (being) shut off,” “no running water,” and “cutting pills” were issues that interfered with communication and with students receiving the skills and experiences they need to receive services. Families need to know that a student can still work and maintain their funding. Many participants reported that there are “huge issues with a lot of families not wanting to risk Social Security.” One participant noted: “a lot of times the parents felt that our involvement was intrusive and that that would affect any type of cash benefit that they were receiving from the Department of Public Welfare or Social Security, or SSI.” If families were not able to appropriately understand and use funding, it tended to negatively affect participants’ decision about employment services.
In every single interview the role of and need for support from the family was discussed. The participants were prompted to talk about their interactions with the student’s family, but usually discussions of the family, especially the mother, occurred well before this prompt was given. Often an individual had discussed their interactions with the family in such depth that by the time the “family question” arose on the interview protocol, this additional prompt was not necessary. These interviews made it clear that the family plays an important role in influencing the services a student received. It was also clear that the family has to work well with other stakeholders to ensure receipt of services.

**School factors.** According to all participants, schools have a major role to play in assisting students with disabilities in gaining the skills and experiences that will allow them to receive employment services. The school’s fulfillment of this role came mainly from two areas of influence. The first influence comes from school stakeholders (e.g. teachers, special education directors, related service personnel). Each plays an important part in determining students’ goals, and/or encouraging experiences for students with severe disabilities. The second area of school influence relates to the school’s ability to provide appropriate training directed at the students’ post-school needs. Specifically, it is important that a school or program is seen by rehabilitation providers as providing appropriate services to adequately prepare students for employment.

**School stakeholder issues.** School personnel have a lot of influence on students (and their parents), and their goals and progress. It is critical that these stakeholders are invested and buy-in to providing appropriate training and guidance to students. They must be motivated, willing, and able to put forth the effort needed to ensure students have the best transition possible. To this end, school personnel must be knowledgeable about services and supports available to help students transition to employment. Unfortunately, the participants’ most
frequently discussed school issue was the lack of school personnel’s knowledge about how to assist students in transitioning to post-school employment. This lack of knowledge came in many different forms. The most common issue discussed was unfamiliarity with adult services and the “movement from entitlement to eligibility.” Most participants believed that when educators and staff are knowledgeable about what skills and experiences go into a successful transition from high school to employment, it will positively influence a student’s chance of receiving employment services.

The second most prominent school stakeholder issue centered on teacher/personnel buy-in (i.e., how invested is the school in working with the rehabilitation provider and other stakeholders to assist the student in transitioning to employment). Most participants agreed that their views toward providing employment services to students with severe disabilities were more positive when school personnel demonstrated a commitment to working collaboratively. A few participants discussed whole districts, but more often buy-in was discussed at the individual staff level. The following example illustrates the challenge one participant experienced with trying to cultivate a working relationship with school personnel.

[H]er school [in] particular has not been completely on board with us... they've kind of wanted to do their own thing and I have tried contacting the teacher over the phone and through emails and not gotten responses... and even when I called over the phone, I tried to see if the person was in when I spoke to somebody else they basically told me that they were not interested in working with me. It happened... [it’s] the same thing they told the coordinator, the VR coordinator so they they’re not really on board with collaborating.

A final stakeholder issue identified was that participants believed that schools were trying to push students out by having them “graduate prematurely.” One participant put it this way: “[I experienced] districts who are interested in moving a student into adult services at age 18 and out of the education system very poorly prepared for employment.” Schools are required to provide services to students with disabilities for as long as they are enrolled in the school and this can be
costly. Some schools may try to graduate students prematurely so that they no longer have to provide services.

The influence of school personnel knowledge and buy-in cannot be underestimated according to participants. Rehabilitation providers rely on the school and trust the referral that comes from the school system when making decisions about providing services. Many highlighted the good relationship they have with the schools and that as their relationship with the schools has improved, so has their confidence in the schools and their ability to place the students that are referred to them. According to one participant:

[And] even you know teachers who are uninformed or misinformed you know we have to trust if we can’t be at the school for a meeting that they have, we gotta trust that the teacher is gonna relay the information about us accurately, and that can often times be an issue too because they’re not trained. . . . They have preconceived notions about what we are.

School provisions. The area most frequently discussed by participants was whether schools were providing appropriate school-based programming to prepare students for life post-school. An acknowledgement that many schools have to focus on academic skills to the loss of functional skills instruction was also heard frequently. However, most participants reported that instruction in functional skills positively impacted a student’s chances of receiving employment services, but acknowledged that often academics was the focus of instruction in schools. One participant put it this way:

I like the functionality piece [be]cause if you understand what you’re doing, and why you’re working, it makes a big difference but because of the way our high schools and programming was changing we still had to provide that academic piece as well.

Many participants lamented the fact that teachers were focusing more on the academic skills needed to pass standardized tests and obtain diplomas instead of focusing on more functional skills. Two participants felt a diploma made an individual more employable and therefore more apt to receive employment services. However, many more participants believed
that students should be focusing less on completing the academic requirements to graduate and more on “targeted instruction” so that “they have skills when they leave school so they can go get a job” whether it be technical classes or “work skills classes.” More than a few participants agreed schools tend to focus too much on graduating the student and not actually on preparing students for the next chapter.

Even when the focus was on student-centered goals and curriculum a few participants still thought that schools were not facilitating appropriate planning for later service provision. These participants indicated that the majority of IEP goals they see for students with severe disabilities are not appropriate or adequate to prepare students for the demands of employment. Two main reasons were given for the inappropriateness of IEP goals. First, the goals were for jobs that were unrealistic for the student. Second, often these employment goals were generated from a student’s stated goals and aspirations, and not based on actual vocational experiences. It was not known if the student had an “actual aptitude” as described by this participant:

most of the IEPs that I read have inappropriate employment goals so from the get go the parents and the student have a false sense of what they can accomplish. I see . . . “will work in the automotive field” so it’s not specific and I see tons of goals that are not tied to any kind of assessment other than vocational skills besides an interest inventory. I think a lot of goals are just based on an interest . . . a stated interest.

Participants reported that it is good when schools have appropriate resources to support the students while they are in school, but that they need to make sure that students and families are not becoming overly reliant on supports. School are “required to have those supports in place,” but the amount of support that an individual receives once they graduate will decrease. The student (and family) should learn to be as independent as possible. As mentioned in the student section, a need for one-on-one support or the lack of an effective behavior plan often prevents an individual from receiving services.
Rehabilitation provider factors. Participants were also asked about the capacity of their organization or agency and their own issues or limitations in service provision and how these influence their decisions about providing services to individuals. These two factors, agency issues and individual provider issues, affect whether students receive employment services.

Agency issues. In each of the organizations represented by the participants, issues of size and manageability of caseload were among the top topics that affected their service provision to students with disabilities. Issues related to resources to address caseload issues, especially staffing, funding, and service structure were also common. Also, factors like their ability to use waiting lists, the chief population that they served, and the push to close cases were factors.

All participants agreed that not just the size (many reported caseloads between 150 and 180), but the manageability of their caseload affected their ability to provide employment services to students. As one participant put it “it is not just size of the caseload, it’s the makeup of the caseload.” One participant spoke for many: “if my caseload continues to be 180 plus, I won’t feel that I have the quality time to spend with them to get them appropriately placed by understanding their strengths, their abilities, their weaknesses and their skills.”

Most participants were concerned about size and manageability of their caseload especially with more students with more severe disabilities needing to be served. Caseloads were getting more complicated, but not smaller. Providing services to individuals with more complex cases and disabilities often takes “more money, more hours” and “more employer contacts.” One participant summed up caseload issues involving those with severe disabilities:

You know you’re gonna have to be there one-on-one so if they’re working 12 hours a week and you have to be a job coach 12 hours a week that doesn’t leave you a lot of time you know to have a heavy caseload. You gotta have kind of lighter people that you can see around your more severe client’s schedule.
These students “need a lot of attention whether it be with job coaching or just to find out what their skills and abilities are to find that perfect job match.” The staff that it would take to serve these individuals was at times viewed as prohibitive with one participant noting, “job coaches are already stretched very, very thin.” Another participant commented, “coaching (these students with severe disabilities) is going to be a beast” and it would be “tough on the vocational specialist.” One participant just thought that often it could not be done when she said this:

I don’t think that having a job coach with one person with really severe disabilities makes good use of money. It’s great if that could happen for everybody, that would be great, but I don’t think it’s economically feasible to do that, so I think it’s great that people try employment but are there other services to make them employable?

Even though these students often need more time to achieve employment, many participants reported having less time available to devote to individual consumers. This in turn effected their service provision decisions. Most respondents reported trying to make “full use” of their resources to try to assist individuals, but the amount of resources they have to use rarely seems enough. These larger, more complex caseloads create more “paperwork instead of core essentials of counseling—job search, job match” and there is less ability to “get someone else involved to do a team approach” or have someone “take something off your plate” according to participants. One participant lamented, “I have a large caseload . . . everybody has a large caseload. You just don’t have that much time because there is bureaucracy and there is paperwork. There is more paperwork than there is one-on-one with customers.”

Non-personnel organizational resources, such as physical space and financial resources were frequently brought up by participants when discussing their decision-making process. Participants felt that a lack of resources influenced what they could provide. Caseloads are so big and there is limited space in many organizations that being on waiting lists is the best hope for receiving services for some students. A few respondents reported doing this when they
“recognized potential” and thought that eventually they could “make a difference.” These are real issues for many participants as this quote states:

It’s our lack of physical space. We have a waiting list right now that has 23 people on it, so it’s a bricks and mortar issue vs. um, well it’s a bricks and mortar issue. We’ve got every available space being utilized and I can’t bring anybody else in unless somebody leaves.

Funding for services and the ability to be reimbursed was another organizational issue, especially for participants who were employed by CRPs. It is critical that individuals have other sources of funding for employment. This can be a home-based waiver, family trust, or other resources. Providers “need to be able to perform services that we can get reimbursed for” and so individuals need to actually have an accomplishable goal in mind and all providers need to be on the same page.

**Individual provider issues.** Participants believed that they tended to err on the side of being open to the employability of individuals with severe disabilities. The sentiment “let’s give it a try” was a common refrain. This view toward seeing the positive potential of each individual was captured by the following participant:

I would say there is only a handful of individuals over the course of 20 years that I have determined too severe. I would say by and large that I am much more able to find a person eligible for services than not eligible.

Most, but not all, participants thought that many of the students they discussed that they denied services to would be “eventually employable.” However, there were a few participants that believed that there are individuals that will never be able to work in a supported or competitive job and that “work activity, sheltered activity” was the area for which to strive. Participants favoring this view noted that these sheltered options were “the most viable structure over a long period of time” and “sheltered work, work activities centers, day activity centers can
serve a real purpose with this type of student.” This sentiment was expressed by a participant this way:

[I] think that there’s a certain percentage of the population that will always be unemployable and I think that the mindset that everybody is employable I think is wrong. It’s ok if people aren’t employable. Trying it yes, but what support systems will they need long term and can society . . . fund those long term for someone to be employable?

A few acknowledged that they believe that their skill sets may be somewhat limited when it comes to serving individuals with severe disabilities. While most participants expressed confidence that they have an adequate training and knowledge base to do their work, a need for further training was identified in the areas of job development, job placement, how to work with students with more diverse support needs, and caseload management. Many participants reported that they felt more knowledgeable than many of their co-workers and their partner employers.

Many participants talked about their “dedication and determination,” but also admitted that much of what they are able to do is because of their connections in the community with employers and other providers. They discussed how their reputation and connections with employers were an important factor in whether they could provide services to students. More than half of the participants expressed concern about the WIOA requirement that all individuals must try employment and were concerned as to the effect it would have on their reputation with employers.

[T]hen you’re not gonna get the employers to be part of your partners. And our employers were really not just employers, but they were our partners. And they did donations; they did other things with us as well—so we really very lucky.

While many individuals talked greatly about their openness and established reputation working with partners there were also discussions about how individuals’ previous experiences influenced their decisions about service provisions. Many individuals talked about balancing their previous experience and “gut feelings,” and being open to possibilities for the student. A
few talked about how having previously been proven wrong in their assessments that an individual would struggle in employment. Statements like “shot in the dark, but it worked” and “seeing is believing” were used to discuss these occurrences. A few participants discussed their progression from believing in and working in a sheltered environment to believing and working in supported employment.

Generalizations do occur at times, as highlighted by this participant: “[I] think that at a certain point once you’ve been doing this for so long you really only have like 10 clients that kind of repeat.” However, most participants discussed the need to also always think of “consumer choice” and “have them be part of the goal-making.” They say when students are given a choice they “ultimately will be able to be more productive” and it “makes it more exciting for them and more motivated to do well because they are part of that.” It is a mixture of being open, but realistic about what the individual can do and making sure that they are part of the decision making and planning. This quote from a participant highlights it well:

[W]e talk about or I think about as they’re talking like what jobs are around the area that they could qualify for or be eligible for, be employable for, have the qualifications for. And then I really give it back to the person to say, you know, you tell me what you want and then we’ll talk about the realisms of doing that.

**Community factors.** Many different stakeholders exist within the community. Participants identified issues related to employers, community knowledge and openness, diversity and availability of services, and the location in which students are seeking employment as sub-factors within the community that affect providers decisions about employment services.

**Employer issues.** Employer openness to hiring and training students with severe disabilities and collaboration are critical to being able to provide employment services to students with disabilities. Most participants referred to their relationships with employers with statements like: “[they’re] really not just employers, but partners” and “[I have a] very good
network of employers in this community.” Some participants made mention of up to 40 different community partners, but most had “go-to” businesses that they could contact for jobs and job-tryouts. They were able to do this because they had “developed relationships” and these employers “were very motivated to get these young people a try.” However, some participants found that relationships with organizations “willing to hire students who have significant disabilities” were hard to come by. As one participant put it, they “need to think about what employer would hire and I think sometimes if we have really complicated people and that’s kind of . . . kind of a scary thought.”

More than one participant discussed the benefit of managers or co-workers having positive experiences or “some sort of training or background” with students with disabilities. This is because misunderstandings about individuals with disabilities and the benefits of employing them still abound as this quote from a participant illustrates: “[What] I used to hear a lot was you know, why would I hire someone with a disability when the unemployment rate is so high that I can get a quote normal person and not have to deal with all this stuff.” However, participants seemed aware of the need to cultivate relationships and understanding to counteract misunderstandings as this quote from a participant shows:

So it’s the important thing for us is that we continue to work hard to maintain good community relationships, with the employers. And, help them to know, what we do here, who we serve, and that you know what a difference they can also help make in that person’s life.

Since the employer relationship is so critical, many participants expressed some worry about how legislation, both local and national, will affect their relationship with employer partners. When asked how they thought the requirement that students with disabilities must try integrated employment before being placed in a more restrictive setting would affect the employability of individual with disabilities, nearly half thought that it would not only hurt the
employment of individual with disabilities, but also “ruin employer relationships.” Many participants reported that if they had to “get employers onboard” and “try individuals out then you’re not gonna get the employers to be part of your partner.” A few said that they thought it would ruin their reputation and credibility with partners they have worked with in the past and make it harder for them to place students.

**Community knowledge and openness.** Whether students will be accepted in community employment did effect participants’ decisions about service provision. Many participants talked about the efforts they make to do outreach about their services to community members and legislators to inform them about their services and about students with disabilities. It was identified that there is a need to “offer more training programs so that we (the community) are aware of the disabilities out there . . . more aware of the opportunities that are available out there for individuals with disabilities.” Community members and employers need to be trained to be more “open-minded and understanding.” Most participants reported that they did not think that people were trying to be ignorant; they were just “afraid” or “intimidated.” A participant discussed her feeling about community openness by saying:

> People just aren’t comfortable and I think people are a lot of times they’re afraid. They don’t want to have too many feelings. They don’t want to even say anything because they think it’s just a touchy subject and they just want to avoid it and they don’t want to talk about it.

Community openness is not just individual openness, but also how accessible the community is both physically and socially. A few participants reported that there are still a lot of locations where students in “wheelchairs and scooters and stuff like that are not allowed in certain places or areas because they don’t fit down an aisle or something.” It was not just physical accessibility, as this participant illustrates “we’re a borderline rural, suburban community, or urban community. And there are not a lot of services for people with hearing
impairments here” or this one: “you know he just has that voice box that a lot of people don’t want to have any part of and it’s not a bad thing you know it’s helped him greatly.” The community members’ willingness and ability to use alternate forms of communication are factors that were considered in decision making. Another individual discussed the fact that an individual who had sensory issues and communicated through sign language and lived in a very rural area struggled due to a lack of supports and community acceptance. It was more of the “communication pieces more than the developmental disability piece” because of the ruralness and lack of supports. She stated it this way: “she would need a full-time interpreter with her in a community setting just because of the ruralness of our town. She would not be able to work in competitive employment without that interpreter.” The student could communicate, but just not in a way that was accessible to those in her community.

**Diversity and availability of services.** Issues of diversity and availability of community programs (e.g. supported employment, sheltered employment, transition programs, CILs) were topics that many participants relayed. One participant complained of a lack of options outside of sheltered workshop (half of all options for her consumers were directed to sheltered workshops) and for another participant supported employment is not an option in an area in which she lives.

Availability of transition programs, if they are accessible and good, was reported as a positive variable in decision making for many participants. Both locally sponsored programs and bigger state and university sponsored programs were talked about favorably by many participants as were Project SEARCH, Project STEP, and summer work programs and “transition institutes.” One participant even stated that:

I can say that the quality of their transition program makes a big difference in the speed in which we can employ somebody. Because if they’ve got a good quality transition program that’s dealing with social skills, independence, self-advocacy then that’s less work for us to do once they come on board.
However, a few participants talked about how they were disappointed by the students that were coming out of transition programs and thought that they would have had more skills taught to them in school and/or in the transition program.

When these community programs are available, participants often thought that they could improve a student’s chances of receiving employment services, but the programs and services have to be used. A forth of the participants talked about the fact that if students and their families were not making use of programs that were available in the community or that they had recommended to them, it may negatively affect their decision to provide employment services.

**Location.** Many respondents reported community issues outside of programming. Transportation was an issue that was brought up by about half of the participants as something that affects their employment decisions. A few talked about how being in a metropolitan area allows transportation to rarely be an issue. However, some individuals, especially those in more rural areas, said that transportation and the need for parents to transport students was an issue that they considered in thinking about employment services. Also, a few participants mentioned the cost of (specialized) transportation in some areas as prohibitive. Walking was not an option and so some were just “stuck.”

Funding provisions and allocations were also brought up as a community factor that may affect rehabilitation providers’ decisions. A few participants made mentioned of having disabilities funding being a legislative and funding priority in their area, and that this allowed them more leeway in whether and how they provide services. Another participant brought up the fact that waiver funding is used and interpreted differently area to area.

[T]his county that he is in particularly struggles because of their funding. There really was nothing set for long-term supports. He is going to need long-term supports . . . you know the way that VR is setup for short-term 90 days . . . and you’re done.
The labor market, the number and types of jobs that are available in a location also effected participants’ decisions about whether students would be successful with employment services and thus should receive them. This lack of “availability of work in their community” is an issue that participants considered when thinking about whether a student with disabilities would benefit from employment services. The rehabilitation providers admitted that they were “lucky to have varied job sites so that not everything was food service or retail,” but admitted that the “labor market is really important in regards to options for people.” If there is not a good labor market or there is an economic downturn, students are often the ones that struggle most.

[We need to be a little bit better about being pragmatic about skills in the labor market . . . how they play in to real employment goals. And so when I think about especially our people with the most severe needs really the labor market allows 15-20 options for people with these severe needs and I don’t . . . want to get into the old days back in like the 70s when we said okay, these are the 5 jobs that you can do.
Chapter V
Discussion

The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, it sought to identify the skills and experiences needed by students with severe intellectual disabilities to obtain employment services. Second, it examined the factors that contribute to rehabilitation providers’ beliefs about the provision of employment services. Both of these areas were investigated from the point of view of rehabilitation providers since these individuals are responsible for making decisions about eligibility for employment services.

The skills identified as most important by rehabilitation providers were social skills, concept of work (e.g., professionalism, work ethic), and quality of work (e.g., speed, stamina, competition). Paid work experience in the community was unanimously viewed as the most important vocational experience needed by students prior to seeking employment services. Many participants also identified vocational experiences in the home, such as participating in chores, as important experiences. Student, family, school, rehabilitation providers, and community emerged as important factors that influence the provision of employment services to students with severe intellectual disabilities.

The important skills, experiences, and factors identified in the current study are not particularly new. The need for workplace social skills has consistently been identified as critical to students’ employment (Benz et al., 1997; Chadsey, 2008; Riesen et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2005), as has the need for paid work experiences before transitioning out of high school (Benz et al., 1997, 2000; Brown et al., 2006; Carter, Austin & Trainor, 2011; Fabian, 2007; Mazzotti et al., 2013; McDonnell & Crudden, 2009; Moon et al., 2011). The factors identified as influencing rehabilitation providers’ decisions about employment services are also well supported in the
literature (Moon et al., 2011, Riesen et al., 2014). The effects of family members’ buy-in and support (Luft & Rubin, 1999; Moon et al., 2011), and their willingness to partner with other stakeholders (i.e. school, rehabilitation providers, community members) are also known to greatly affect the provision of employment services. (Conley, 2007; Fogg et al., 2010; Luft & Rubin, 1999; Moon et al., 2010).

Through the identification of these important skills, experiences, and factors two themes emerged from the study: expectations and collaboration. It became evident that ensuring that all stakeholders were holding appropriate expectations and that these expectations were uniform across stakeholders was critical to a student’s success. Also, these expectations were more likely when there was effective collaboration among the previously mentioned stakeholders.

**Appropriate Expectations**

One of the overarching themes that emerged from this study was the need for all stakeholders to hold appropriate expectations for students with severe disabilities. Participants reported stakeholders holding expectations that were either too high or too low, and believed that the presence of either interfered with students obtaining appropriate skills and experiences to allow them to receive employment services.

Inappropriately high expectations and aspirations for students with disabilities may adversely affect the extent to which students receive appropriate vocational skills and experiences. Participants reported that often it was the students and their parents that had the most inappropriately high expectations and goals that interfered with the student receiving services. While high expectations on the part of family members can have a positive affect on employment outcomes of individuals with disabilities (Lindstrom & Benz, 2002), it is important
that families balance their idealistic expectations with what is realistic (Kramer & Blancher, 2001). Individuals may focus on unrealistically high goals for students because they do not want to hurt students’ feelings. Ultimately, if inappropriately high expectations are maintained, not just the students’ feelings will be hurt, but also their chances of employment.

Inappropriately low expectations were also identified as a problem. Low expectations may result in enabling (i.e., intending to help but exacerbating a behavior or action); and/or protectionism (i.e., shielding students to their detriment from experiences presumed to be possibly harmful). Enabling students causes students to be unduly dependent on others and not to take ownership of their own actions and goals. When enabling and protectionism are present on the part of service providers it can present an obstacle to employment (Gross & Francis, 2015) because these service providers do not view students as capable and may not provide them with job skills and experiences. Enabling on the part of parents and community members is also detrimental, especially in regards to reinforcement of a student’s inappropriate actions and behaviors. This reinforcement is problematic because inappropriate behaviors allowed in a social or family setting are often exhibited in a work setting. Most participants believed that when students are held accountable and have the motivation and follow-through to complete a task appropriately, their chances of receiving services increases. This is true for all individuals whether they have a disability or not. If expectations are appropriate, then better outcomes occur.

Need for Effective Collaboration

A second theme that emerged from this study was the need for all stakeholders to collaborate. In order for this collaboration to be effective stakeholders have to see it as a partnership where all participants: (a) have appropriate knowledge and training, (b) are willing to
When participants talked about effective collaboration they talked about forming and facilitating partnerships. In order for these partnerships to be effective, all stakeholders must have knowledge not only about their own role in helping the student, but also about the roles of others. Knowledge about the student is also critical. Schools can facilitate collaboration by providing information about the student, their skills and deficits, and the assessments conducted (Brown et al., 2006). Families can provide information about students’ skills and behaviors in the home and community environments, and how these lend themselves to employment. Rehabilitation providers can provide information about how the student might fit into their existing programs and the services they would be able to provide. Participants highlighted all of these examples; however, they also discussed that when stakeholders withhold relevant information or share information that confuses the issues, effective collaboration is diminished.

In order for the collaboration to go smoothly, stakeholders have to work to make sure that all appropriate information is shared, all points of view and roles are honored, and all stakeholders strive for consistency in expectations. Effective collaboration using a team approach will ensure students with disabilities have the planning and supports that will allow them to receive supports to transition to employment.

This call for collaboration between stakeholders (Carter et al., 2012; Certo et al., 2008; Kohler, 1998; Mazzotti et al., 2009) and information sharing (DeStefano & Wagner, 1993; Inge & Moon, 2010) have been heralded in the literature for some time, but according to participants, this type of collaboration is still not happening to the scale necessary. Rehabilitation providers
are often not present at IEP meetings (Agran et al., 2002) and/or schools fail to share needed documents and information (Moon et al., 2011). Participants mentioned that often the information shared by schools does not go beyond fulfilling IEP measures and IEP goals are not realistic or meaningful. Lack of a functional transition team has been identified as detrimental to students receiving services (Riesen et al., 2014).

**System Design**

The administration of rehabilitation services in the United States does not lend itself to the delivery of employment services to students with severe intellectual disabilities – the students with the greatest support needs. Resources are limited and some claim that these more complex cases are avoided in favor of being able to take on more cases and those most likely to have successful closure. Many VR service providers require that individual providers show a high rate of successful closures with 91% having numerical requirements of how many outcomes a counselor has to show in one year (Hayward & Schmidt-Davis; 2005). Students with severe disabilities often take more time and resources to serve and there is no guarantee that individuals will be successfully placed in employment at the end of service provision. This may cause rehabilitation providers to shy away from providing employment supports to these students.

**Limits of service provision.** Students with severe intellectual disabilities need initial job placement services and ongoing, long-term supports to be successful in employment; however, obtaining and maintaining needed supports can be difficult for many students with severe intellectual disabilities. Vocational Rehabilitation Status 6 services (i.e., extended evaluation to determine if the individual can benefit from services) can continue for only 18 months. Once the 18 months have passed a determination must be made about the student’s employability. Even if
an individual is successful in obtaining a job placement, services usually are terminated after 90 days. Once these supports (funded and provided through VR) expire, other funding resources (e.g. developmental disabilities) must be obtained if the individual requires long-term supports to maintain employment. Unfortunately, not all individuals have access to this kind of funding. The identification of long-term funding is critical to students with severe disabilities being seen as viable candidates for employment services (Moon et al., 2011). Many participants in the current study struggled to find students eligible for VR services if they did not have pre-identified funding for ongoing supports. The uncertainty of being able to pay for and obtain supports makes it very hard for individuals to be seen as viable candidates for work.

Lack of funding was a critical issue for many participants, but so was a lack of previous work skills and experiences. Participants reported that they tried to use the entire 18 months allotted for extended evaluation to assess and prepare students. However, if the student didn’t come with skills and experiences to allow them to be placed with minimal training/support or did not truly want to work, it was difficult to find the student eligible for services. Rehabilitation providers’ time is limited and most individuals with disabilities need to apply with the prerequisite skills that will allow them to obtain employment (Timmons et al., 2011). However, students with severe intellectual disabilities are never going to have all of the prerequisite skills for employment and may always need some additional skill (re)training to gain and maintain a job.

One of the three key qualifications for eligibility for VR services is that the individual seeking services must be able to keep a job after services are rendered (RSA, 1993). The rehabilitation provider must be able to conclude that the student will be able to obtain skills and find employment through the provision of rehabilitation services (Berven & Drout, 2012). Some
students with disabilities are always going to need extensive, ongoing support to maintain a job and therefore, may always be viewed as ineligible for services.

**Service priorities.** When it comes to the provision of employment services to individuals with severe intellectual disabilities and extensive support needs, there is a tension in how to prioritize the use of resources. This tension exists between serving a few individuals with significant and ongoing support needs verses using resources to assist a great number of individuals who will be easier to place in employment (Noble, Honberg, Hall & Flynn, 1997).

The first view point says that the huge output of resources to help one individual needing extensive supports would be better used to help a greater number of individuals with less extensive support needs. The individual who has less extensive support needs may have a better chance of gaining and maintaining employment. It would be a “better use of tax payer money” as one participant in this study put it. Some participants, and members of the general public, seem to believe that resources should not be provided to support individuals whose support need is too great; it is not economically feasible and responsible to support them. In fact, many rehabilitation providers are reluctant to provide services if a student cannot self-manage and clearly articulate his/her needs and preferences without another person present (Moon et al., 2011). Similarly, individuals with severe disabilities who do not easily fit into standard jobs are often not seen as viable candidates for employment services (Luecking & Luecking, 2006). This is because the time, money, and employer connections that will allow a student to be supported extensively are limited.

Individuals with the most severe disabilities are supposed to receive preference for services when funds are limited per the federal order of selection requirement in Title One of the Rehabilitation Act (Rehabilitation Act Amendment, 1986). “Supported work is limited to
individuals with severe handicaps for whom competitive employment has not traditionally occurred or individuals for whom competitive employment has been interrupted or intermittent” (p. 30546). This requirement to serve individuals with the most severe disabilities was further affirmed in the passage of WIOA (2014). Despite legislation that directs services to be provided to individuals with the most severe disabilities, the designation of an individual as too severe to work remains. In addition, 56% of day program and work preparation recipients receive services in segregated settings (Braddock et al., 2008). Individuals with severe disabilities are often denied the important opportunity to work in the community because of factors outside of their control.

Work is often central to an individual’s life and can provide him/her with resources to live a meaningful life (e.g., money, friends, purpose, independence). Some claim that individuals with the most severe disabilities deserve a chance at community employment regardless of the resource output (Rubin & Roessler, 2008) because work is a critical, central part of living a meaningful life (Strauser, 2014). Work is often much more than just showing up at a job. Everyone should have the opportunity to live a meaningful life and so providing employment supports to all should be a societal priority.

Nearly 30 years ago, federally funded demonstration programs showed that supported employment can be an effective method for assisting individuals with severe disabilities to be employed (Brown et al., 2006; Cimera, 2009; Rusch & Braddock, 2004). Participation in supported employment results in more earned income and higher reported quality of life (Cimera, 2007). Financial and social benefits for the individual with disabilities and for society can occur through the use of supported employment because of increases in wages earned and taxes paid, but it takes a few years of successful and maintained placement for this to be realized.
(Cimera, 2007; Conley et al., 1989; McCaughrin et al., 1993; Tines et al, 1990). However, if individuals are not able to maintain employment for a few years or their support need remains too great, these financial benefits will not be seen. Individuals with severe disabilities may need more specialized and strategically designed jobs to meet their individual needs because they are not able to be easily placed in a ready-made job.

**Rectifying “severe disabilities” in employment eligibility.** Exactly what qualifies as a severe intellectual disability varies from person to person and organization to organization. This was also true within the current study. The disability-related characteristics, support needs, and abilities of individuals with severe disabilities that were described varied greatly across participants. The majority of individuals that were described as having intellectual disabilities so severe that they were ineligible for employment would have been classified by the researchers as having a moderate, or even mild, disability. However, participants often said that they were talking about the individuals with the most severe disabilities that were referred to them. It is evident that many students with severe disabilities are not even being referred for employment services. Students with the most severe disabilities are often judged not viable for community employment long before the time arrives to apply for employment services. Students cannot receive employment services if they (or the transition team that supports them) do not apply for them.

Individuals with the most severe disabilities rarely appear on the caseloads of rehabilitation providers, but also rarely in research about transition to employment. Instead, this research tends to focus on individuals with high incidence disabilities. The National Transition Longitudinal Studies (see Wagner, D’Amico, Marder, Newman, & Blackorby, 1992; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza & Levine, 2005) are often used to examine the employment outcomes
of individuals with disabilities, but they do not specifically examine outcomes for individuals with severe intellectual disabilities because few students with severe disabilities are included in these databases. Studies of employment outcomes for individuals with learning disabilities and “mild and moderate” or “high incidence” disabilities (Blackorby et al., 1997; Carter, Trainor, Ditchman, Sweden, & Owens, 2011b; Madaus, Gerber, & Price; 2008) are common, but studies about employment of individuals with specifically severe intellectual disabilities are limited. This is unfortunate because individuals with severe intellectual disabilities seeking competitive employment have struggled more than those with physical or mild disabilities, and those with the most severe intellectual disabilities have tended to have the worst outcomes (Test, Aspel, & Everson, 2006; Wagner et al., 2006; Wehman, 2006). Students with severe intellectual disabilities have a right to be seen as viable candidates for employment in research and in practice.

It is assumed that greater numbers of individuals with more severe disabilities are going to begin seeking services and appear on VR caseloads with the new requirements of WIOA (2014). Changes to this law require that all students up to age 25 try employment before being placed in a more restrictive setting. VR agencies are the main transition planning contact for students with disabilities (Cameto et al., 2004) and the number of individuals seeking services is only going to increase. Rehabilitation providers will soon begin to have to provide support and services to individuals with more severe disabilities than they are used to serving.

Many participants expressed a concern about how this increased need to provide services to individuals with more extensive support needs will affect their already large caseloads, their relationships with employers, and the employment of individuals with disabilities in general. Participants reported that they felt neither prepared nor knowledgeable about how to best serve
students with significant support needs, especially those with behavioral and communicative needs. This is troublesome as rehabilitation providers’ preparedness and knowledge affect decision-making (Rogan & Rinne, 2011). If rehabilitation providers are not prepared and knowledgeable, then service provision will suffer and individuals with severe disabilities may experience even greater challenges in gaining and maintaining employment. If inadequate services are provided to students, then it will hurt not only provider and consumer relationships, but also employer relationships. Many participants worried that employers may be less likely to work with, and employ, individuals with disabilities if students were not “employment ready” when they arrived on the job site.

Limitations

There are several limitations that should be noted when viewing the results of this study. First, the participants self-selected to participate in the interviews. It is possible that only individuals that were comfortable sharing their views were sampled. Second, individuals may have put forth an idealized vision of themselves during the interviews that does not accurately reflect reality. This may have occurred if participants did not want to express ideas that did not align with accepted thought or practice. Third, the participants in this study are not nationally representative. Most participants clustered in the Midwest. Representation from west of the Rocky Mountains or in the New England region was not present. This is problematic because different states and regions may view the employability of individuals with severe disabilities differently and have different standards for employability. Fourth, an attempt was made to sample participants from the range of rehabilitation service providers; however, only small numbers of individuals participated from CRP, VR, and private rehabilitation. As a result, it is
not possible to determine whether differences exist among sub-groups of rehabilitation providers. Finally, perhaps the greatest limitation was the difference in how participants defined “severe intellectual disabilities”. Although all participants believed they were discussing students with severe intellectual disabilities, others may not characterize these students as having severe intellectual disabilities. This limits conclusions that can be drawn about the factors that affect the provision of services to students with severe disabilities.

**Implications for Research**

Further research should investigate two or three highly effective transition to employment systems where individuals with severe intellectual disabilities are finding success in community employment. This research should focus on: (a) how decisions are made about appropriate goals and expectations, (b) how stakeholders are involved in setting and forwarding these expectations, and (c) how systems are set up to facilitate collaboration and partnerships that result in students with severe disabilities receiving employment services. Effective collaborative partnerships with uniform, appropriate expectations are critical, but these partnerships are rare. An investigation of how model programs create effective partnerships could result in the identification of procedures and policies that ensure students with severe intellectual disabilities receive employment services.

Many participants voiced concern over the increasing numbers of students with disabilities (especially more severe disabilities) on their caseload. That concern intensifies with WIOA’s call to provide employment opportunities to all. As the effects of WIOA begin to manifest, data will be needed to determine if the mandate to try integrated employment is actually resulting in more individuals working competitively. In particular, data should be
gathered to determine whether more students with severe disabilities are receiving employment services and the level of resources needed to support these students. Also, particular focus should be directed at whether the requirement that all individuals try employment results in higher employment expectations for students with severe disabilities on the part of stakeholders. Is competitive employment expected of more students with severe disabilities? What types of competitive employment are students both targeting and obtaining? Answers to both of these questions would do much to inform practice and research.

Finally, inquiry into whether WIOA’s new requirement to try integrated employment has any effect on partnerships between school and rehabilitation providers, rehabilitation providers and employers, and rehabilitation providers and families would be helpful. Efforts to increase and require partnerships have appeared in legislation previously, but often collaboration is limited or simply not occurring. It would seem that better collaboration and partnerships would need to occur if students with severe intellectual disabilities are going to be placed in community employment.

**Implications for Practice**

Rehabilitation providers identified a number of skills, experiences, and factors influencing their decisions about the employability of students with severe disabilities. Perhaps the greatest factor affecting whether students with severe disabilities are able to obtain employment services is whether the system and stakeholder partnerships are set up to provide and meet the support needs of these individuals.

The current rehabilitation services system is, frankly, not currently designed to support individuals with severe intellectual disabilities who require on-going, long-term supports to
maintain employment. Students either need to apply for services with adequate job skills and most of their support needs met, or rehabilitation providers need further training to learn how to best serve and support students with the most severe disabilities. In addition, there is a need for changes within the rehabilitation service delivery system that will allow rehabilitation providers to provide more intensive and ongoing supports. In particular, decreasing caseload sizes and increasing funding for long-term, on-going job supports would enable more providers to provide employment services to students with severe intellectual disabilities.

It is unlikely that students with the most severe disabilities will ever be completely independent in employment regardless of the amount of instruction they receive. The first steps towards improving service provision for individuals with the most severe disabilities are to a) increase all stakeholders’ knowledge about how to provide supports to these students and b) increase collaboration across stakeholders. With this increase in collaboration and knowledge about how to better assist students with severe disabilities, there is a requirement that stakeholders begin to see all individuals as employable. This would most appropriately be accomplished by ensuring that all stakeholders are appropriately trained in how to work with students with the most severe disabilities and support their unique needs. Service providers could receive this training during their undergraduate or graduate certification programs. Families, students, and community members could receive this training through outreach efforts by service providers, as many participants in this study discussed.

Once individuals’ view of student’s employment potential and knowledge has been improved, there will be a need to ensure that employment services are being provided to students with the most severe disabilities and that integrated, community work is the goal. Steps towards this have already been taken with the requirement that supported employment serve individuals
with the most severe disabilities and that all individuals attempt integrated employment before being placed in a more restrictive setting. However, greater legislative and administrative oversight needs to occur to make sure that service providers are actually following through on these requirements. Perhaps providers, like employers, could receive financial benefits for ensuring the employment of individuals with the most severe disabilities.
References


State Vocational Rehabilitation Service Program (2001).


Appendix A

Letters of Support from JPD and Transition Specialists Presidents

National Rehabilitation Association
Job Placement Division

08/13/2014

Dear Committee:

The National Rehabilitation Association Job Placement Division is an enthusiastic partner with UIUC’s Department of Special Education in: Barriers to the Employability of Transition-Age Students with Severe Disabilities: Rehabilitation Providers’ Perceptions. This project is designed to learn about the experiences and attitudes individuals who provide transition to employment services for individuals with severe disabilities.

As a principal partner, we support this research conducted by Dr. Stacy Dymond (PT) and Ms. Julie Pickens (graduate student). We will provide the research team the opportunity to reach out to our organization’s members and examine their experiences.

Sincerely,

Christopher Kempski

Christopher Kempski, DAPA, MS, ADVCERT, LMHC, LRC, CRC, BCPC, CEAS
President
NRA Job Placement Division
Transition Specialties

08/13/2014

Dear Committee:

The National Rehabilitation Association Transition Specialties Division is an enthusiastic partner with UIUC’s Department of Special Education in: Barriers to the Employability of Transition-Age Students with Severe Disabilities: Rehabilitation Providers’ Perceptions. This project is designed to learn about the experiences and attitudes individuals who provide transition to employment services for individuals with severe disabilities.

As a principal partner, we support this research conducted by Dr. Stacy Dymond (PI) and Ms. Julie Pickens (graduate student). We will provide the research team the opportunity to reach out to our organization’s members and examine their experiences.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Elizabeth M. Watson
President
NRA Transition Specialties
Appendix B

Invitation Email

Dear First name, Last name:

Do you spend a majority of your workweek assisting individuals with severe intellectual disabilities transition from high school to employment? Have you been doing so for three or more years? Do you do so as a VR, CRP, or private rehabilitation professional? If so, you are invited to participate in a research study about your experiences with working with transition-age individuals with severe intellectual disabilities seeking to obtain employment.

This study is being conducted by Julie Pickens and Stacy Dymond, both from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. We are interested in the views and experiences of rehabilitation professionals who help individuals with severe intellectual disabilities transition from high school to employment. As a rehabilitation professional and member of the National Rehabilitation Association, you know that many students with disabilities are not successfully transitioning from high school to employment and that this is especially true for individuals with severe intellectual disabilities. Your input is essential to helping the field understand the issues affecting the transition to employment of these students.

If you are interested in participating in a one hour interview about your experiences please respond to this email to discuss your eligibility to participate. Please include your name, phone number, and a preferred time of day for me to call.

All individuals selected to participate in interviews will receive a $25 e-gift card voucher.

Sincerely,

Julie Pickens, Doctoral Student
Stacy Dymond, Professor
Department of Special Education
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Appendix C

Screening Tool

Thank you for your interest in being part of this research study. I would like to ask you a few questions to get to know more about you and the work you do. This will help me to determine if you qualify to participate in the study.

1. Could you please tell me a little bit more about what you do as part of your position?

2. How would you define severe intellectual disabilities?

3. Approximately how many individuals have you worked with this year who have severe intellectual disabilities?

4. About how much of your work week do you spend assisting individuals with disabilities who are transitioning from high school to employment?

5. Are you currently employed by a state-federal VR office, a non-profit or other CRP, or as a private rehabilitation provider?

6. How long have you been an adult service provider?

Individuals Who Meet Study Criteria

Thank you so much for sharing this information and for your interest in this study. I think your experiences lend themselves well to this research and I would like to invite you to participate in this study. As part of the study you will be asked to participate in a one hour interview. This interview will be conducted using Google Hangout, Skype, or telephone. In addition, we would like to record your interview so that we can transcribe it to text for use in analyzing the data.

1. Are you still interested in participating in the study? _______________

2. Can we set up a time in the next week or two to conduct the interview? __________

3. It would be helpful to conduct the interview by Google Hangout or Skype so that I can see you while we talk, but we can certainly talk by telephone if that is easiest for you. Which method would you prefer? __________

4. What is your (skypename, google+, or telephone number)? _____________________

I will be emailing you a consent form, a confirmation of the interview date and time, and some information that will help you prepare for the interview. Please sign and return the consent form and confirm the interview date by responding to the email.
Individuals Who Do Not Meet Study Criteria

Thank you for talking with me today. Unfortunately you do not meet the exact criteria for this study. I really appreciate you taking the time to inquire about the study. May I contact you again for future research opportunities that may arise?
RESEARCH STUDY PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!

Do you spend a majority of your work week assisting students with severe intellectual disabilities transition to employment?

Have you been doing so for 3 or more years?

Do you do so as a VR, CRP, or Private Rehabilitation Professional?

If so, you are invited to participate in a research study about your experiences with assisting transition-age individuals with severe intellectual disabilities to obtain employment.

If you are interested in participating in a one hour interview about your experiences please email Julie Pickens (jpicken2@illinois.edu) at the University of Illinois to discuss your eligibility to participate. Please include your name, phone number & preferred time to call.

All individuals selected to participate in interviews will receive a $25 visa gift card voucher
Appendix E

Email for More Participants

Hello ------,

Thank you for contacting me recently to express interest in my study. As you may remember, this study focuses on the views and experiences of rehabilitation professionals who help individuals with severe intellectual disabilities transition from high school to employment.

I have obtained very useful information from the interviews conducted thus far; however, I am hoping to obtain a few more participants. I am contacting you today to ask your assistance with nominating other knowledgeable professionals to participate in this study. These individuals might be from your own organization or from other organizations. In particular I am interested in talking with individuals who are employed as a VR, CRP, or private rehabilitation professional and:

a) spend the majority of their work week assisting individuals with severe intellectual disabilities transition from high school to employment and
b) have you been doing so for three or more years.

If you know of one or more people who may be a good fit for this study, please forward my original email message (see below) to them and ask them to contact me if they are interested in participating.

Thank you again for your interest in this study and your assistance in helping me better understand the issues facing students with severe disabilities who are trying to transition from high school to employment.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Julie Pickens
Jpicken2@illinois.edu

Do you spend a majority of your workweek assisting individuals with severe intellectual disabilities transition from high school to employment? Have you been doing so for three or more years? Do you do so as a VR, CRP, or private rehabilitation professional? If so, you are invited to participate in a research study about your experiences with working with transition-age individuals with severe intellectual disabilities seeking to obtain employment.
This study is being conducted by Julie Pickens and Stacy Dymond, both from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. We are interested in the views and experiences of rehabilitation professionals who help individuals with severe intellectual disabilities transition from high school to employment. As a rehabilitation professional, you know that many students with disabilities are not successfully transitioning from high school to employment and that this is especially true for individuals with severe intellectual disabilities. Your input is essential to helping the field understand the issues affecting the transition to employment of these students.

If you are interested in participating in a one hour interview about your experiences please respond to this email to discuss your eligibility to participate. Please include your name, phone number, and a preferred time of day for me to call.

All individuals selected to participate in interviews will receive a $25 e-gift card voucher.

Sincerely,

Julie Pickens, Doctoral Student
Stacy Dymond, Professor
Department of Special Education
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Appendix F

Interview Protocol

Date:________________________
Participan code:_______________

Introductory Script: (2 minutes)

Thank you for agreeing to help us to better understand your experience working with young people with severe intellectual disabilities who are getting ready to transition from high school to employment. For this interview we are defining severe intellectual disability as: A disability that significantly impacts intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior causing it to be well below average and require extensive ongoing supports in life activities.

There is no right or wrong answer to each of the questions I will ask. In fact, we anticipate that there may be great differences among the individuals we interview. Sharing your own experiences will help us to get a better picture of the issues involved with helping individuals with severe intellectual disabilities obtain employment.

Do you have any questions at this time?

Audio recording instructions: (1 minute)

If it is okay with you, I will be audio-recording our conversation. The purpose of this is to allow me to record all the details you provide, and at the same time be able to carry on an attentive conversation with you. All your comments will remain confidential and the recording will be erased at the end of the data analysis.

I am going to turn on the audio recorder now, okay?

Interview script: (55 minutes)

1. I’d like to start by asking you to think about the full range of individuals with disabilities who come to you to apply for rehabilitation services. In general, what are the things you consider when you make decisions about the employability of ANY individual with a disability?

   - What, if any, personal factors do you consider?
   - What if any organizational factors do you consider?

2. What, if any, additional things do you consider when the individual has a severe intellectual disability?
• Is there anything else you consider?

In the email I previously sent you, I asked you to think about the last two or three individuals with severe intellectual disabilities that were referred to you that you did not think were employable and were closed without receiving employment services. For the next few questions I would like you to think of each student individually. I will refer to them as student A, student B, and student C.

3. Tell me about Student A and what his or her support needs were . . .
   - What level of supports does the student need to function in the community?
   - Tell me a little bit about his or her functioning and overall support needs.

4. What were some areas of strengths for him or her that would have helped him or her obtain a job?
   - Can you give me an example?
   - What did you mean when you said . . . .?

5. What about him/her hindered his/her ability to be employable?
   - Was there any particular lack of:
     - job-related skills
     - job skills
     - self-advocacy skills
     - self-care skills
     - motivation/follow-through
     - other traits that would interfere with getting and keeping a job?

6. What, if any, other factors negatively impacted his or her appropriateness for employment services?

7. What previous experiences have you had serving a student similar to student A?
   - In what ways did that (lack of) experience with similar students impact your decision about student A?
   - How do you think working with him/her impacted your ability to serve students with severe disabilities in the future?

8. How confident were you that you had the appropriate knowledge, skill sets, and support to assist the student?
   - What training would have helped you to better serve the student?
   - How did issues of organizational capacity affect your decision?

9. How much did his or her current funding situation affect the decision-making process?
   - What types of funding did this student have access to?
10. What type of interactions did you have with his/her parents and school personnel?
   - How knowledgeable were these individuals about the transition process?
   - What would have made your interactions with parents and/or school personnel more productive?

11. How much did considerations about available community resources play into your decision?
   - What employment opportunities exist in your local area for a student like him/her?
   - How much did the student’s ability to easily and safely move around the community and get to viable employment sites affect your decision?
   - What influence did the student’s need for long-term intensive support and the availability of such support in your area have on your decision?

12. Are there any other factors you think I should know about that effected your employability decision for Student A?

13. Tell me about Student B and what his or her support needs were...
   - What level of supports does the student need to function in the community?
   - Tell me a little bit about his or her functioning and overall support needs.

14. What were some areas of strengths for him or her that would have helped him or her obtain a job?
   - Can you give me an example?
   - What did you mean when you said . . . .?

15. What about him/her hindered his/her ability to be employable?
   - Was there a lack of any particular:
     - Job-related skills
     - job skills
     - self-advocacy skills
     - self-care skills
     - motivation/follow-through
     - other innate traits affected his/her ability to be viewed as employable?

16. What, if any, other factors negatively impacted his or her appropriateness for employment services?
17. What previous experiences have you had serving a student similar to student B?
   o In what ways did that (lack of) experience with similar students impact your decision about student B?
   o How do you think working with him/her impacted your ability to serve students with severe disabilities in the future?

18. How confident were you that you had the appropriate knowledge, skill sets, and support to assist the student?
   o What training would have helped you to better serve the student?
   o How did issues of organizational capacity affect your decision?

19. How much did his or her current funding situation affect the decision-making process?
   o What types of funding did this student have access to?
   o How worried were you about his/her ability to maintain supports to keep a job given their current funding situation?
   o If there was reluctance on the part of those involved to pursue employment because of fear of losing benefits how was this handled?

20. What type of interactions did you have with his/her parents and school personnel?
   o How knowledgeable were these individuals about the transition process?
   o What would have made these interactions more productive?

21. How much did considerations about available community resources play into your decision?
   o What employment opportunities exist in your areas for a student like him/her?
   o How much did the student’s ability to easily and safely move around the community and get to viable employment sites affect your decision?
   o What influence did the students need for long-term intensive support and the availability of such support in your area have on your decision?
22. Are there any other factors you think I should know about that effected your employability decision for Student B?

23. We’ve talked about two students so far. I’m wondering if there is another student with severe intellectual disabilities with whom you’ve worked that is substantially different than students A or B? (If yes) Tell me about Student C and what his or her support needs were... (If no, skip to question 33
   o What level of supports does the student need to function in the community?
   o Tell me a little bit about his or her functioning and overall support needs.

24. What were some areas of strengths for him or her that would have helped him or her obtain a job?
   o Can you give me an example?
   o What did you mean when you said . . . .?

25. What about him/her hindered his/her ability to be employable?
   o Was there any particular lack of:
     o job-related skills
     o job skills
     o self-care skills
     o motivation/ follow-through
     o self-advocacy skills
     o What else did you see as a hindrance?

26. What, if any, other factors negatively impacted his or her appropriateness for employment services?

27. What previous experiences have you had serving a student similar to student C?
   o In what ways did that (lack of) experience with similar students impact your decision about student C?
   o How do you think working with him/her impacted your ability to serve students with severe disabilities in the future?

28. How confident were you that you had the appropriate knowledge, skill sets, and support to assist the student?
   o What training would have helped you to better serve the student?
   o How did issues of organizational capacity affect your decision?

29. How much did his or her current funding situation affect the decision-making process?
   o What types of funding did this student have access to?
   o How worried were you about his/her ability to maintain supports to keep a job given their current funding situation?
   o If there was reluctance on the part of those involved to pursue employment because of fear of losing benefits how was this handled?
30. What type of interactions did you have with his/her parents and school personnel?
   o How knowledgeable were these individuals about the transition process?
   o What would have made these interactions more productive?

31. How much did considerations about available community resources play into your decision?
   o What employment opportunities exist in your areas for a student like him/her?
   o How much did the student’s ability to easily and safely move around the community and get to viable employment sites affect your decision?
   o What influence did the students need for long-term intensive support and the availability of such support in your area have on your decision?

32. Are there any other factors you think I should know about that effected your employability decision for Student C?

Now that we have talked about each student individually, I’d like you to think more globally about your experiences working with transition-age students with severe intellectual disabilities.

33. In what ways did Students A, B, & C differ from your “typical” consumers that you are able to provide services to?
   o Is there something that makes these 3 students different than the majority of other consumers you serve?
   o Can you give an example?

34. In your own office, what prevents more consumers with severe intellectual disabilities from receiving services?
   o What effect does the size/or manageability of your caseload have on your decisions?
   o What impact do the training opportunities you have available in your organization have on your ability to work with individuals with severe intellectual disabilities?
   o How do the resources you have available within your organization help you serve individuals with the most severe intellectual disabilities?
   o What impact does the fear of being unable to bring consumers to a successful closure in a timely fashion weigh on your decisions?
35. In your opinion, what are the three most important job related skills and/or experiences that an individual with severe intellectual disabilities needs to have to successfully transition from high school to employment?
   - How would you rank the job-related skills and experiences needed by a student?
   - What did you mean when you said______?

36. What skills or experiences do you see as over-valued by other stakeholders (e.g., parents, teachers, social workers)?
   - What skills/experiences do you think schools/parents put too much emphasis on?

37. Has there been a specific occasion when you were provided some additional information about an individual that changed your view of their employability?
   - (If yes) Tell me about what information were you given and by whom?
     a. How did it change your view about the person’s employability?
     b. Did it influence how you thought about employability for other students?
     c. Do you have any further examples?
   - What, if any, information could be provided to change your decision about the employment eligibility of Student A?
     a. How about B?
     b. Or C?

38. Are you familiar with the changes that were made with the reauthorization of WIA this summer?
   - (If yes) In your opinion, how will WIOA and its requirement effect the transitioning of students with severe intellectual disabilities?
     a. How will the requirement that individuals up to age 25 must try integrated employment before being placed in a more restrictive setting affect the employability of students with severe disabilities?
     b. With the increase in funds being given to VR to expand their role in transition, how do you see your role changing in assisting students prepare for employment?
     c. Now that the amount of time for extended services have been lengthened, what effect do you think this will have on the employability of individuals with severe intellectual disabilities who often times need more intensive, on-going service?
   - (If no)
d. One of the requirements is that individuals up to age 25 must try integrated employment before being placed in a more restrictive setting. How do you think this requirement will affect the employability of students with severe disabilities?

e. Another section increases the funds being given to VR to expand their role in transition. With the increase in funding, how do you see your role changing in assisting students prepare for employment?

f. The reauthorization of WIA has also lengthened the amount of time for extended services. What effect do you think this will have on the employability of individuals with severe intellectual disabilities who often times need more intensive, on-going service?

39. Is there anything else you would like to tell me related to our discussion today or anything you would like to reiterate?

**Part 3 (2 minutes)**

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. This concludes our interview. If you have any questions about this research project you may contact Dr. Stacy Dymond, who is the primary investigator of this study. Her information is on the copy of the consent form that was emailed to you last week.

I will be emailing you a brief summary of the interview in the next few days. Once you receive the summary, please review it to make sure that I have accurately summarized the information you shared with me today. Once I receive your returned summary I will send you a $25 gift card voucher as a thank you for participating.

If you think of something that you would like to address after this interview is over please do not hesitate to contact me or to include it in the interview summary sheet. Thank you again for taking the time to share your experiences with me today!
Appendix G

Piloting Questions

• Was it clear what each question was asking?

• Was there any wording that you struggled to understand (and if so what)?

• Were there any questions that you were reluctant to answer or think others might be reluctant to answer? Why?

• Given the stated purpose of the study did all the questions seem relevant?

• Do you believe that the research questions can be answered with the information that this interview protocol will solicit?

• Are there any additional questions you think I should ask?
• Is there anything I could have done differently as an interviewer?

• Any other things or relevant information you want to share with me?
Email

Dear (interviewee's name),

Thank you for your willingness to participate in the research study I am conducting with Dr. Stacy Dymond about the views and experiences of rehabilitation professionals who help individuals with severe intellectual disabilities transition from high school to employment. I am writing to confirm our (Skype, phone, Gchat) interview on _ (day) _, _ (date) at _ (time).

As I mentioned when I spoke with you by telephone, the interview will focus on your personal experiences working with individuals with severe intellectual disabilities who wish to transition from high school into employment. Please spend some time thinking about the skills and experiences of the last two or three individuals with severe intellectual disabilities who were referred to you that you felt were unfit for employment. In particular, think about why these individuals were unfit for employment and what evidence could be provided to change your mind about the employability of these individuals.

Attached to this email is a consent form. Please review this form carefully. If you wish to participate, please type your name in the spaces provided and return the form to me as soon as possible via an email attachment. Also, please print a copy of the form for your own records.

Also attached to this email is a brief demographic questionnaire. Please complete this questionnaire and return it with the consent form. All individuals who complete the questionnaire, participate in an interview, and return a brief interview summary will receive a $25 e-gift card voucher.

Sincerely,
Consent form

Dear participant name,

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Julie Pickens and Stacy Dymond, both from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The purpose of the study is to investigate rehabilitation professionals’ experiences with assisting transition-age individuals with severe intellectual disabilities to obtain employment. As a rehabilitation professional, your input is essential to helping the field understand the issues affecting the transition to employment of students with the severe intellectual disabilities.

If you choose to participate in this study you will be asked to:

- Reflect on the last three students with severe intellectual disabilities that were referred to you for employment services that you deemed to be ineligible for services.
- Complete a brief demographic questionnaire
- Participate in a 60 minute interview about your experiences with assisting transition-age individuals with severe intellectual disabilities to obtain employment.
- Review a brief summary of the interview transcript to ensure its accuracy.

Your participation is completely voluntary and your responses will be kept confidential. The risk to you from participating in the study is no more than minimal and is not greater than you would encounter in your daily professional life answering questions from consumers and other stakeholders. Although we cannot guarantee that you personally will receive any benefit from this research, your experiences with assisting transition-age individuals with severe intellectual disabilities to obtain employment will help inform the field about the struggles these individuals face as they transition from high school to employment. All participants will receive a $25 gift card voucher when they return the summary of their interview transcript.

If you have questions about this study please contact Julie Pickens at jpicken2@illinois.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (collect calls will be accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

Cordially,

Julie Pickens
Department of Special Education
288 Education Building, 1310 S. 6th St.
Champaign, IL 61820
jpicken2@illinois.edu

Stacy Dymond, Ph.D.
Department of Special Education
288 Education Building, 1310 S. 6th St.
Champaign, IL 61820
Sdymond@illinois.edu

I, _ (fill in name here) ____, consent to participate in this research.

I, _ (fill in name here) ____, consent to have my interview audio-recorded.
Survey

Factors that the Affect the Employability of Transition-Age Individuals with Severe Intellectual Disabilities: Rehabilitation Providers Perspective

The following questions are intended to collect background information about you. Please check the response(s) and/or fill-in the blank with the answer that best describes you and your experience.

What is your gender?
- Male
- Female
- Other

What is the highest educational degree you have obtained?
- Associates
- Bachelors
- Masters
- Master +hours
- Doctoral
- Other

What certifications have you earned?
- CRC
- CACREP
- Other

What best describes the geographic location of the area(s) you serve?
- Rural
- Urban
- Suburban

In what state do you currently work? ________

What type of organization best describes where you work?
o Governmental Vocational Rehabilitation (e.g. state-federal vocational rehabilitation office)

o Community Rehabilitation Provider (e.g. non-profit organization, human service cooperative, Independent Living Center)

o Private Rehabilitation Provider

During 2014, what percentage of your caseload of transition-age youth had severe intellectual disabilities?

o 1-25%

o 26-50%

o 51-75%

o >75%

When determining eligibility do you use IQ or level of functioning?

o IQ

o Level of functioning

o Both

o Other_________

Thank you for completing this pre-interview questionnaire. I look forward to speaking with you soon and learning more about your experiences working with students with severe intellectual disabilities.
Appendix I

Email Reminder

Hello ------,

I am really looking forward to talking to you tomorrow (Date) at (time) on (Skype/phone/Gchat) about your experiences with young people with severe intellectual disabilities who are transitioning from high school to employment.

As I mentioned the interview will focus on your experiences working with individuals with severe intellectual disabilities who wish to transition from high school into employment. Please spend some time thinking about the skills and experiences of the last two or three individuals with severe intellectual disabilities who were referred to you that you thought were unfit for employment. In particular, think about why these individuals were deemed unfit for employment and what evidence could have been provided to change your mind about the employability of these individuals.

If this date and time no longer work for you please email me back at your first convenience and let me know a few dates and times that may work better for you.

I look forward to talking with you soon,

Julie Pickens

Jpicken2@illinois.edu
Appendix J

Email and Attached Summary

Email

Dear [interviewee's name],

Thank you for your willingness to share your experiences and views with me. It was a pleasure talking with you. I learned a great deal and I hope it was equally beneficial for you.

Please review the attached summary and check to make sure it accurately reflects your views and experiences. For each question please check the bubble next to the statement that correspond with your beliefs about that section of the summary. Feel free to strike anything from the record by changing the text color to red. If there is anything you would like to elaborate on please write it in the space provided in each section. Once you have reviewed the document and made your desired changes please save your changes and return the saved document to me via email at jpicken2@illinois.edu.

I appreciate your help in ensuring that I accurately captured your views and experiences. Thank you again for your participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Julie Pickens
Doctoral Candidate
jpicken2@illinois.edu
Summary

Decision-making with all individuals with disabilities experience summary:

- That was precisely what I was trying to say
- No, that was not quite what I meant, more like___________________________
  ___________________________________________________________________
  ___________________________________________________________________
  ___________________________________________________________________
- I would like to add (optional)_________________________________________________________________
  ___________________________________________________________________
  ___________________________________________________________________

Decision-making with individuals with severe intellectual disabilities process summary:

- That was precisely what I was trying to say
- No, that was not quite what I meant, more like___________________________
  ___________________________________________________________________
  ___________________________________________________________________
  ___________________________________________________________________
- I would like to add (optional)_________________________________________________________________
  ___________________________________________________________________

Student A summary:

- That was precisely what I was trying to say
- No, that was not quite what I meant, more like___________________________
  ___________________________________________________________________
  ___________________________________________________________________
- I would like to add (optional)_________________________________________________________________
  ___________________________________________________________________

Student B summary:

- That was precisely what I was trying to say
- No, that was not quite what I meant, more like___________________________
  ___________________________________________________________________
Student C summary:

- That was precisely what I was trying to say
- No, that was not quite what I meant, more like ____________________________
- ________________________________________________________________
- I would like to add (optional) _______________________________________
- ________________________________________________________________

How students differed from “typical consumer”

- That was precisely what I was trying to say
- No, that was not quite what I meant, more like ____________________________
- ________________________________________________________________
- I would like to add (optional) _______________________________________
- ________________________________________________________________

Office impact on employability summary:

- That was precisely what I was trying to say
- No, that was not quite what I meant, more like ____________________________
- ________________________________________________________________
- I would like to add (optional) _______________________________________
- ________________________________________________________________
Top three job related skills/experiences summary:

- That was precisely what I was trying to say
- No, that was not quite what I meant, more like ____________________
  ____________________
  ____________________
  ____________________
- I would like to add (optional) ____________________
  ____________________
  ____________________
  ____________________

Over-valued skills summary:

- That was precisely what I was trying to say
- No, that was not quite what I meant, more like ____________________
  ____________________
  ____________________
  ____________________
- I would like to add (optional) ____________________
  ____________________
  ____________________
  ____________________

Information that could change your mind about employability summary:

- That was precisely what I was trying to say
- No, that was not quite what I meant, more like ____________________
  ____________________
  ____________________
  ____________________
- I would like to add (optional) ____________________
  ____________________
  ____________________
  ____________________

Effect of WIOA summary:

- That was precisely what I was trying to say
- No, that was not quite what I meant, more like ____________________
  ____________________
  ____________________
  ____________________
End of the interview summary

- That was precisely what I was trying to say
- No, that was not quite what I meant, more like_______________________
  __________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________

- I would like to add (optional)__________________________________________
  __________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________
Appendix K

Reminder to Return Summary

(Participant),

I hope this email finds you well. I have yet to receive your feedback on the summary I emailed you. Your feedback is still needed and it is essential to ensuring accurate interpretation of the study’s data.

Please complete the attached summary form and return it to me via email at jpicken2@illinois.edu at your earliest convenience. Thank you again for your participation!

Sincerely,

Julie Pickens

jpicken@illinois.edu
Appendix L

Phone Script

Hello (Participant Name),

Thank you again for your participating in an interview about your experiences as a rehabilitation professional on (date on interview). I have yet to receive your feedback on the summary I emailed you. Your feedback is still needed and it is essential to ensuring accurate interpretation of the study’s data.

Did you receive this email?

Did you have any questions about the summary?

Would you like to email me back the summary form or do you have time to respond to it verbally right now?

*If a participant selects to review the summary on the telephone, the researcher will write down the participant’s responses to each question.