Trends in Employment Outcomes for People Receiving Postsecondary Education Supports from Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies

Issue

Postsecondary education opens up a world of opportunities for high school graduates. Several sources agree that any type of postsecondary education benefits students by allowing them to explore their interests and by teaching them skills they might not gain in high school or subsequent work experiences (Schneider et al, 2000). The American labor force has been shown to benefit as a result of people’s pursuit of postsecondary education, because they participate in the labor force at a higher rate and generally have higher earnings than those who do not continue beyond high school (NCES, January 2001; Gilmore et al, 2001). Labor force trends and the increased enrollment in postsecondary education demonstrate that students also see further education as a benefit to their earnings level and career success (NCES, January 2001).

For people with disabilities, the importance of enrolling in and completing a postsecondary educational program is magnified in relation to employment outcomes and earnings. The National Longitudinal Transition Study indicates that people with disabilities participate in postsecondary education in smaller numbers and frequently do not complete these programs. This leads to low participation in competitive employment and much lower earnings than people without disabilities (Stodden and Dowrick, 2001). For people with disabilities who participate in postsecondary education, there is a 50.4% labor force participation rate for those who have completed at least four years of college (Getzel, Stodden and Briel, 1999). Compared with the national average that only 34% of individuals age 16-64 with disabilities who seek employment are employed (Harris, 1998). In fact, Stodden (1998) presents information indicating a stronger positive correlation between disability and employment and level of education than the trend for the general population. People with disabilities with even less than four years of postsecondary education are employed at
double the rate of those with just a high school diploma (Getzel, Stodden and Briel, 1999). These findings show that access to the opportunities afforded by a postsecondary education makes an enormous difference in the employability of people with disabilities.

The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) system exists to provide assistance to individuals with disabilities seeking employment. VR's services include postsecondary education supports to eligible consumers, which makes the VR system a good source of support for individuals with disabilities looking for higher education. The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), within the Department of Education, allocates resources to state VR offices and collects information from them in the RSA-911 database, its record of national trends for VR in employment support activities. An earlier study examined RSA data to determine: (1) the extent to which VR provides postsecondary education services; (2) the rate of individuals within the VR system receiving postsecondary education services compared to the rate of individuals within the general population participating in postsecondary education; and (3) whether there is an association between postsecondary education services and VR outcomes (Gilmore et al, 2001). This report, a further examination of the data from RSA-911, focuses on understanding the findings in relation to several other well known studies of trend data, conducted from within the general population that addressed people with disabilities and postsecondary education.

Findings: Current Practice

The RSA data have been used to examine participation in postsecondary education by VR clients (Gilmore, Schuster, Zafft, & Hart, 2000). In 1997, 35% of people closed from VR services were found to have participated in postsecondary education. VR provided these services to 21% of people closed in 1997 and 14.5% of people already had some postsecondary education at application. The VR participation rate is comparable with the Blackorby & Wagner, (1996) statistic that 37% of students with disabilities participate in postsecondary education (from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS). These rates demonstrate the lower participation rate for people with disabilities when compared with the NCES National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988. (NELS) NELS statistic that 72% of 8th graders in 1988, who did not report having a disability, entered some type of postsecondary education by 1994.

The much higher incidence of enrollment in postsecondary education within the general population is borne out by other recent statistics showing such wide gaps. Students in the NLTS showed enrollment rates of 13% for those with disabilities vs. 53% for those in the general population two to three years out of high school. This gap persisted with increases in enrollment for both groups at the five-year mark (Blackorby and Wagner, 1996). Enrollment trends tracked by the National Center for Educational Statistics indicate that enrollment in postsecondary education has risen gradually over the last three decades. "Recent growth in undergraduate
enrollment may be associated with the increasing importance of postsecondary education in the job market. Over this decade, the strongest job growth is expected to occur in occupations requiring at least an associate’s degree." (NCES, 2001). Over the last ten years, many more people have been completing college (NCES, 2000). Between 1987-88 and 1997-98, the number of students being awarded Bachelor's and Associate's degrees rose by 19% and 28%, with the number receiving advanced degrees rising even more sharply (Master's by 44% and Doctorates by 32%). The cost of postsecondary education has increased concurrently with enrollment. For the 1999–2000 academic year, annual prices for undergraduate tuition and room and board were estimated to be $7,302 at public colleges and $20,277 at private colleges. Between 1989–90 and 1999–2000, prices at public colleges have risen by 22 percent, and prices at private colleges have increased by 27 percent, after adjustment for inflation.

Turning to the study of the effect of postsecondary education or services on employment outcomes, the RSA-911 data and other studies show similarities in outcomes by disability category. Although the receipt of postsecondary education services does not significantly increase the successful rehabilitation rates for people with disabilities, within the VR system, it does lead to higher rates of participation in competitive employment. Also, it has shown to be associated with better employment outcomes. Higher earnings and more hours worked are reached by people who received postsecondary education services (Gilmore et al, 2001). The rates at which people receive postsecondary supports through VR differ by disability category. People with orthopedic disabilities have the highest rate of participation in postsecondary education (averaging 47% over time) and people with mental retardation had the lowest (averaging 11% over time). The NLTS study also illustrates the ways in which youth with particular disabilities could succeed in one outcome but not succeed as much in another. For example, three to five years after secondary school, youth classified as having learning disabilities or speech impairments were employed at rates virtually similar to the general population. Earnings for people in these categories, as well as for those with emotional or behavioral disabilities, significantly increased for them also. However, these groups had low enrollment rates compared to people with visual or hearing impairments.

**Summary of Challenges**

A valid comparison of VR data with other measures contributes to a broader understanding of the ways in which people with disabilities have participated in postsecondary education over time and the extent to which they have benefited, whether or not they were receiving postsecondary education supports through VR.

**Trends in earnings**

Figure 1 shows a comparison of projected yearly incomes from the different postsecondary education categories of VR closures. A successful closure into the competitive labor market means the person has been employed for a minimum of 90 days, one quarter of a year. The income data for VR closures is the amount earned in the week after the
person’s case was closed. This figure is used to project yearly income. On average incomes rose about 45% over the time considered for the study. The highest income level is for people who received college services; those with previous postsecondary education were very close. However, at an average of just under $18,000/year this is not very good. The federal poverty level for a family of four is included as a benchmark. Of interesting note is that of all the groups compared only those who received postsecondary education services or had previous postsecondary education had an income above this poverty threshold.

Income for the general public, taken from the Current Population Survey (CPS), for different education levels is noted in figure 4. Most notably is the income for people who have completed a Bachelor’s Degree are much higher than others at an average of over $43,000 in 1998, 76% over their 1985 level. For the general population those with some college education had an average income of just over $27,500 in 1998, an increase of 68% from 1985. For those with only a high school education, their average income was just over $23,500 in 1998 an increase of 63% from 1985. The average income for a person who received college services from VR was lower than a person from the general public with no more than a high school education.

Figure 6 shows income differences across disability. Only people who received college services are displayed. With the exception of people with mental retardation, there is not that much variation in earnings across disability groups. In the large cluster of lines, people with mental illness were the lowest earners ($16,900 in 1998) compared with people with orthopedic disabilities ($19,200 in 1998). A difference of a little over $2,000 a year, from lowest to highest earners, among the disability groups was fairly consistent. People with mental retardation earned about $9,800 in 1998.

Trends in Cost
"The Digest of Education Statistics, 2000 (NCES, January, 2001), presents data on the increasing costs of postsecondary education. Figure 2, using data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), displays trends in costs of postsecondary education. The IPEDS divides the data into costs for private and public institutions. It is clear from figure 2 that costs for private institutions have grown substantially over time and are much higher than public institutions. The VR data used represents the cost of purchased services for a given case. This is not exclusively costs of the postsecondary education services purchased, but these costs are reflected in this item. The specific data presented here is for those who received only college/university services. A previous study showed that over this time-frame, the costs of closures for people who received college services showed the most increase in cost over time (Gilmore, July 2001).

From 1985 to 1998 the average cost of a closure for a person who receives college services rose by about $4,000, just over 120%. As previously noted, the tuition costs at colleges and universities have increased dramatically over this time frame. Both public and private tuitions have increased to the same degree, about 130% over time, although
for private institutions this represents an increase of close to $8,000 a year as opposed to $1,400 a year in public institutions.

**Implications & Recommendations**

Data supporting the benefits of postsecondary education are plentiful and the conclusions drawn from it are generally not argued. From an employment perspective, a major point is the access to better paying jobs for those people with postsecondary education. It is important to note the ever-increasing disparity in employability and earning potential between those with, and those without, a postsecondary education. If the benefit of postsecondary education is to spread to people with disabilities, they must have increased access to it. It is important to note that the participation rate in postsecondary education for individuals with disabilities has not increased as much as the rate for the general population. The VR system offers an excellent opportunity for individuals with disabilities to obtain some degree of postsecondary education. However, more efforts can be made to increase its availability to the entire realm of individuals with disabilities, especially those with more severe disabilities.

**For service professionals**

VR agencies provide postsecondary education services to many individuals. Up to 47% of successful closures of people with an orthopedic disability received such services. However, for people with mental retardation or sensory impairments participation in postsecondary education is much less frequent. Professional development for rehabilitation professionals about the benefits of postsecondary education to people who are not traditionally considered for postsecondary education should be developed. Training, along with information on the benefits of postsecondary education, would provide information on services available and the types of accommodations and other support strategies for people with severe disabilities to succeed in school. There have been a small number of federally funded projects that have begun to develop training material for secondary school teachers, students, families, college faculty, and adult rehabilitation professionals such as in Maryland, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire.

**For individuals**

Most people in the general population are aware of the benefits of postsecondary education. People with disabilities experience the same types of benefits, such as access to higher paying jobs, than those who do not have any postsecondary education. Outreach to transition-aged students who may not consider postsecondary education should begin prior to graduation and such services should be included in the Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) process for students involved with VR. Aside from the benefits of improved employment outcomes, Hart, et al. (2001) found that people with some postsecondary education experience needed less intensive on-the-job supports, when employed. There is a need for further research on the intensity of on-the-job supports for individuals who have had a postsecondary education.
For policy makers

Vocational Rehabilitation agencies spend a large amount of money on postsecondary education services for their consumers. On average, these cases cost twice as much as cases for people who do not receive any postsecondary education services (Gilmore, 2001). Under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) VR agencies are becoming more involved with other state agencies, such as One-stop entities and TANF/Welfare to Work agencies, regarding employment issues for people with disabilities. The potential for increased consumers in the VR system seeking postsecondary education is high. Mechanisms for sharing the costs between agencies need to be implemented to provide better opportunities for postsecondary education for shared consumers. TANF agencies trying to reduce their roles should pay close attention to the outcomes of people with disabilities within the VR system. To achieve income levels above poverty level people receiving postsecondary education, on average, are the ones exceeding this level, as noted in figure 1.

As previously stated, the benefits of postsecondary education are noted across all disability groups. However there is a large gap in who participates in postsecondary education based on disability. More research into providing supports to all students is needed. Specific grant monies should be targeted towards demonstration and service projects for improving access and supports for students with disabilities seeking postsecondary education.

References

Berktold, J., and Horn, L., MPR Associates (1999): "Students With Disabilities in Postsecondary Education: A Profile of Preparation, Participation, and Outcomes"; National Center for Education Statistics; Larry Bobbitt Project Officer


U. S. Census Bureau (2000): "School Enrollment - Table A-5: Table A-5. The Population 14 to 24 Years Old by High School Graduate Status, College Enrollment, Attainment, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: October 1967 to 2000"; Internet release Date: June 1, 2001
Figure 1.

Closure cost & Tuition costs

- - - VR: College  - - Tuition public  - - Tuition private
Figure 2.

Comparison of VR earnings to general population

- VR: College
- High School
- Some college
- Bachelor's Degree
Figure 3.

Closure cost & Tuition costs

$14,000
$12,000
$10,000
$8,000
$6,000
$4,000
$2,000
$0


--- VR: College  --- Tuition public  --- Tuition private
Figure 4.

Closure cost & Tuition costs

- □ - VR: College
- ▲ - Tuition public
- ● - Tuition private