

# issue brief

## The Impact of Personnel Factors on Employment Outcomes of Urban At-risk Youth

Now in its third decade, the field of transition to adult life for youth with disabilities has amassed a history of legislation, regulation, policy, models of intervention, and research related to the processes leading to expected post high school outcomes (Carter, Austin & Trainor, in press). Through substantial efforts to identify the key variables in successful transition to employment, a number of predictors have emerged (Test, Mazzotti, Mustian, Fowler, Kortering & Kohler, 2009).

### authors

George P. Tilson  
Omayra Muñoz-Lorenzo

One of the most consistent predictors has been community-based work experience while youth are still in high school, particularly paid jobs-- where students are integrated into authentic work places alongside co-workers without disabilities (Luecking, 2009). Over the years there have been ample descriptions of vocational, career and technology education and work experience programs for youth with disabilities (Alwell & Cobb, 2006; Kohler & Field, 2003). For the most part we know the mechanics of how to implement such interventions -- and considerable outcome data have been drawn from evaluations of these efforts. However, we do not know what characteristics and perceptions make one employment specialist more effective at achieving high employment outcomes compared to another with less ideal results.

On the youth side of the equation we know that certain groups of students with disabilities

are more likely to have poorer transition outcomes than others; in other words they are at greater risk of dropping out of school, unemployment or underemployment, social isolation, homelessness, dependence on others, or even involvement in the criminal justice system. These marginalized youth include 1) minority youth, particularly those living in urban settings (Fabian, 2007; Povenmire-Kirk, Lindstrom, & Bullis 2010; Velcoff, Hernandez, & Keys 2010); 2) youth with developmental disabilities, including intellectual disability (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Verdonschot, et. al., 2009); 3) youth with emotional/behavioral disabilities and mental illness (Armstrong, Dedrick & Greenbaum, 2003; Blitz & Mechanic, 2006; Bond, 2004; Clark & Unruh, 2009; Zigmond, 2006); and 4) youth with multiple and significant disabilities (Brown, Shiraga, & Kessler, 2006; Certo, et. al., 2009).



## what we know

While it would seem the research waterfront has been covered on the critical components of transition, we found few investigations of the association between direct service staff capability (competence, values, talents, instincts, behaviors) and post high school outcomes. What is known empirically about the frontline professionals, including transition and employment specialists, who are responsible for carrying out the programmatic features and best practices that have been touted in the literature? Kohler and Greene (2004) identified desired teacher competencies in transition. Several scholars have looked at the skills needed by transition providers, and the impact on staff development (Morningstar & Clark, 2003). Carter and his colleagues (2010) identified limited teacher competence as a factor in the low participation rates of youth with significant disabilities in career-related resources and activities, even though the 34 high schools in their study offered a wide array of career-related opportunities. In an exploratory study of 28 job coaches serving adults with psychiatric disabilities in 14 supported employment programs, Blitz and Mechanic (2006) found that employment barriers could be classified as either personal or environmental and required interventions that were tailored to each individual. However, the authors state that their “study was not designed to rigorously evaluate the performance of the job coaches themselves” (p. 414). Related to implementing work-based learning, career education, job placement, and workplace supports, other efforts have been undertaken to identify the competencies of the professionals who provide these services. The work of such entities as Virginia Commonwealth University, the Association of Persons in Supported Employment, the Association of Rehabilitation Educators, the Division on Career Development and Transition (of the Council for Exceptional Children), TransCen, Inc., the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability/Youth, and the Commission

on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification have all been involved in identifying such competencies – although few of these competencies have been corroborated through empirical research.

Understanding the needs of business and establishing working relationships with employers has been identified as one skill set for job development professionals providing work-based experiences and employment for youth with disabilities (Luecking, 2009). This bolsters the findings of Gilbride and his associates (2003), who identified three major characteristics that appeared among employers who were more likely than not to hire and support people with disabilities who were represented by employment specialists. These were work cultural issues, job match, and employer experience and support. In their study of job development staff in community rehabilitation programs Fabian and Waugh (2001) identified skill requirements that employment specialists needed in order to successfully help job seekers find and keep employment. Chief among these skills was the ability to understand the business perspective.

A national transition program operated by the Marriott Foundation requires staff to be oriented to the needs and perspectives of the business community (Tilson, Luecking, Donovan, 1994). Since 1990 Bridges from school to work has established partnerships with thousands of companies and served more than 15,000 youth, most of whom fall into the highest risk categories identified earlier. There have been several studies examining factors contributing to transition outcomes among youth participating in Bridges (e.g.,

We do not know what characteristics and perceptions make one employment specialist more effective.

Fabian, 2007; Luecking & Fabian, 2000). However, only modest focus has been given to staff-related factors related to successful outcomes in this program (Fabian, Lent & Willis, 1998; Garcia-Iriate, Balcazar & Taylor-Ritzler, 2007). Fabian and colleagues (1998) found that more intensive job-site

supports were associated with better youth outcomes, and Garcia-Iriate et al, (2007) found that the delivery of job specific and off-site work supports were predictive of higher employment retention for individual youth participating at one of the Bridges sites.

## advancing knowledge and practice

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Building on the work of this previous research, the Center on Transition to Employment for Youth with Disabilities (the Center) is embarking on a new study to pinpoint those characteristics and skills of employment specialists that strongly contribute to successful employment outcomes for transitioning youth, particularly those in the highest risk categories. We will be conducting in-depth interviews and case studies of Bridges staff with the expectation that these professionals serve as viable proxies for a wider range of transition personnel responsible for placing youth in community-based paid jobs. The intent of this mixed method study (Creswell, 2009) is to examine the types, level and intensity of direct intervention services delivered by employment specialists in a multi-site transition program. In addition, the Center is investigating the perceptions and attitudes employment specialists have toward their professional role in order to identify staff-based factors contributing to successful job placement and high retention rates of high-risk transition-age youth and young

adults with disabilities. The methodology incorporates basic quantitative descriptive elements combined with qualitative empirical case study design for data collection, analysis and interpretation (Yin, 2009). Additional analyses will be applied to identify detailed contextual evidence of events, conditions, and the relationships between them, and to discover meaningful patterns that reinforce theory and answer the research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

By investigating the causal relationship between direct staff capability and employment outcomes we will have a better understanding of the staff-related factors that lead to successful employment outcomes. Knowing these characteristics, competencies, values, talents, instincts, and behaviors has great implications in preparing and training educators and adult service providers who serve transition-age youth, specifically in regards to placement of these individuals into employment based work experiences and paid jobs.

## resources

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Attitudes and Beliefs of Job Development Professionals toward Employers: Technical Report (August 2011)  
[http://www.discoverabilitynj.org/RutgersReport\\_TransCen\\_8.09.11.pdf](http://www.discoverabilitynj.org/RutgersReport_TransCen_8.09.11.pdf)

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## authors

George Tilson, Ed.D., TransCen, Inc.

Omayra Muñoz-Lorenzo, University of Maryland