

Preparing for the future: Vocational rehabilitation and research partnerships for innovation

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Abstract.

BACKGROUND: The Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) represents the chief administrators of the 78 vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies in every state, territory, and the District of Columbia. In anticipation of the 100th anniversary of the public VR program, CSAVR launched its Vision 2020 goals with an express interest in innovation. CSAVR recognizes that research is important to provide the data that VR agencies need to continually improve their outcomes and services.

OBJECTIVE: The authors make a case for why researcher-VR partnerships are an important strategy for innovation and provide suggestions for strengthening those partnerships.

METHODS: The authors describe CSAVR's investment in research and provide data from a survey of state VR agencies on research participation.

RESULTS: Researchers can increase state VR agency participation in their projects by involving the agency in study design, minimizing the time and resource burden on the agency, and demonstrating that the proposed research will yield products that benefit customers and improve staff competency.

CONCLUSION: VR agencies are motivated to engage in research that will clearly add value and improve operations with minimal burden. It is hoped that greater agency participation in research will yield better data to guide agencies in the future.

Keywords: Practitioners, implementation, public agency participation in research, vocational rehabilitation

1. Introduction

Before we get to the heart of this article, we wish to provide background information about the public vocational rehabilitation (VR) program and the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR). The VR program exists in all the States, District of Columbia and Territories. Every state must designate an agency to administer the program, per the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Pub.

L. 93–112), as amended most recently by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 (Pub. L. 113–128). In accordance with the law, some states have elected to have two agencies, with one serving individuals who are visually impaired and another, a general agency, serving individuals with all other disabilities. As a result, there are now 78 agencies across the states, territories, and District of Columbia that constitute the public VR program, whose purpose is to assist eligible individuals with disabilities to obtain, retain, or advance in competitive integrated employment as well as serve business.

The CSAVR is a membership organization of the chief administrators of the 78 public VR agencies.

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The Council's members and their agency staff assist some 1.2 million persons with disabilities to become or remain productive members of the workforce as well as provide support to their business customers with such issues as recruitment and the provision of reasonable accommodations. CSAVR's mission is to maintain and enhance a strong, effective and efficient national public vocational rehabilitation program.

With CSAVR's mission in mind, we are especially excited to be asked to take on this project as it relates directly to the principles articulated in the CSAVR-led Vision 2020 initiative. The Year 2020 marks the 100th anniversary of the public VR program. Vision 2020 is intended to demonstrate that the public VR program is proactive, responsive to the principles of WIOA, and a role model in the disability employment community. The public VR program is driven by a commitment to two customers, people with disabilities and business, at the intersection of ability and the demand for talent. The Vision 2020 principles are:

- Innovating solutions to achieve greater access to and use of VR services. Our goal is to achieve the most effective outcomes for our customers.
- Building careers and retaining talent in America's workforce by investing expertise and resources to benefit our customers.
- Customizing services and expertise that provide flexible supports and services. We accomplish this through specialized strategies to meet the workforce goals of our customers.
- Leading and engaging in collaborative strategies with our partners who are working with us to achieve greater collective impact at all system levels (national, state, and local).

The VR program needs timely, relevant, high-quality research for us to continuously improve our service in order to deliver on our commitment to services to people with disabilities and business as it relates to each of the four Vision 2020 principles. Innovating solutions (Principle #1) most certainly demands we identify and evaluate evidence-based practices to achieve the most effective outcomes for both customers. We trust this paper will provide researchers and VR program staff alike an opportunity to consider how to better work together to achieve mutual benefit.

CSAVR has been proactive in working with researchers, recognizing that their efforts drive the future work of the VR program staff. CSAVR has partnered with numerous research projects with the specific intent to influence outcomes that are more

practical and less theoretical, and improve the career outcomes for individuals with disabilities and benefit the business bottom line. Meaningful findings, improved knowledge translation to VR agencies, increased involvement of VR agencies in future research, and new model demonstrations with VR leadership, should increase the chances that the needs of VR agencies are going to be met.

Funds from model demonstrations give agencies opportunities to experiment and innovate, an ability agencies do not have without additional funds. Often, participation in research places additional administrative demands on agencies, such as training costs, changes to information and case management systems, increased data gathering, and lost productivity. Without increased funding to cover these costs, agencies must shift dollars from their direct service budgets, thus most likely causing productivity to fall. If agencies do not have a way to buffer that negative impact, then the quantity and quality of their services and outcomes will most likely suffer. Thus, the more researchers can be clear about the possible benefit or payout of research participation, the more likely agencies are to participate. The question becomes: How can researchers create protocols that minimize the burden and costs for VR agencies at the front end and also demonstrate that there is a reasonable likelihood that the return will benefit the agency and their customers?

2. The environment and historical context

WIOA, which became law in 2014, brought significant new responsibilities to VR agencies. Chief among these responsibilities is set forth in Section 113, which requires each state to reserve a minimum percentage of its federal dollars to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) for students with disabilities ages 14 to 24 who are in need of the services. Another significant provision is Section 511, which places limitations on the payment of subminimum wages by entities holding special wage certificates under Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (Pub. L. 75-718), as amended. Section 511 requires VR agencies and others to work more closely with youth and schools prior to any youth's participation in subminimum wage employment. In addition, WIOA comes with new reporting requirements mandating that agencies retool data collection and case management systems, as well as requiring new partnerships for data sharing.

VR agencies became responsible for the implementation of these provisions the very day the law became effective, and there was no new funding, guidance or history to assist with planning, budgeting, and implementation of these requirements.

What has been the impact of the above factors? The result has been that more and more VR agencies are declaring that they do not have enough resources to serve all those desiring their services and thus must limit or prioritize services per a provision in the law known as Order of Selection (OOS). OOS requires VR agencies to serve individuals with the most significant disabilities first when there are not enough resources to serve everyone who is eligible. In OOS, individuals with the most significant disabilities are given a priority over those with less significant disabilities. In FFY 2018, 37 VR agencies were in an active OOS. The number continues to trend upward. In FFY 2018, there were approximately 16,513 individuals with disabilities waiting to receive VR services across the VR agencies in OOS. While we know with some certainty the numbers of individuals on agency waiting lists, we do not know the full impact because often once the word is out that a VR agency is in OOS, many individuals with disabilities who could benefit from VR services stop coming and referral sources do not refer them.

Other challenges faced by VR agencies are hiring freezes, staff turnover, reduced federal funding for training, and new data reporting requirements. WIOA also required new performance standards called the Common Performance Measures by which the performance of state VR agencies and other WIOA core partners will be evaluated. Since the implementation of WIOA, it has not been business as usual for state VR agencies. Yet even with the performance pressures, VR agencies are participating in research and value it, particularly if the benefits of participation are clear to them.

3. Perspectives of state vocational rehabilitation administrators

In preparing this article we started with the following question: Why do state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies choose to participate or not participate in research projects? We were invited to explore this issue and provide some answers. As former state VR Directors and now on staff with the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), we both had many opportunities to commit

our agencies and staff to research projects and thus may have some insight into the matter. To prepare for this article and not to rely solely on our own experiences, we reached out to the current VR agency Directors in all the states, the District of Columbia, and the territories to obtain the most up-to-date views on this subject.

To gather the opinions of VR agencies directly, we developed and administered a questionnaire about their engagement in research or lack thereof. The questionnaire asked about challenges to participation, advantages of participation, sources of information about research opportunities, recommendations, and what would entice them to participate in research. Most questions offered them forced-choice options as well as an open-ended "Other" choice, along with the ability to check all that applied. A word about our results before addressing them: We recognize that there might be some bias because it was the member organization asking for their input, but we believe this was the best way to obtain the needed information.

Staff from 37 state VR agencies responded to our questionnaire. Again, for those who may not be familiar with VR agencies, there are three types: Combined, General, and Blind. Some states have a "combined" VR agency that serves all persons applying for services regardless of the nature of their disability. Other states have two separate VR agencies: a Blind agency that serves individuals whose primary disability is blindness or a visual impairment and a General agency that serves individuals with any other disability. Of the respondents, seventeen or 46% were Combined; 11 or 30% were General; and, 9 or 24% were Blind. Thirty-three (81%) of the respondents were state VR Directors, while the remainder were senior staff. The majority, 25 (68%), responded that their agency had participated in external research in the past five years. Of the remainder, seven (19%) had not and five (13%) were not sure.

Participating in interviews, providing case management data, and providing support for recruitment were the three most often cited types of research engagement (see Table 1). Going back to the challenges mentioned at the beginning of this article, our take is that these activities may be the least burdensome and invasive to the agencies' operations. The next question addresses this point, as shown in Table 2.

The top three cited responses all deal with concerns about the time and resources necessary to participate. While VR agencies value research, they have finite resources to serve customers and meet the Common

Table 1
What type of research has your agency engaged in?

Types of Research	Responses
Participated in Interviews	20
Provided case management data	19
Provided support to recruiting people with disabilities into studies	18
Hosted a pilot study	9
Conducted a model demonstration with a subcontracted external evaluator	9
Participated in an intervention	7
Participated in a randomized controlled trial	7

Table 2
What challenges exist for VR agencies engaging in research projects?

Challenge identified	Responses
Not enough time	30
Requires too much staff time	29
Too much interference with direct service time and resources	24
Value of potential results or findings to the agency not clear	15
Agency's participation costs not covered	14
Proposed research not valuable to the agency	13
Too complex	8
Data required to participate is not available	7
Lack of knowledge about opportunities	5

Performance Measures noted earlier. One goal for any researcher desiring VR agency participation should be to minimize the time and resource burden on the agency as much as possible by relying on existing data before ever asking an agency to engage in new data gathering efforts.

Table 3 shows the advantages agencies identified to participating in research projects agencies. Clearly what is most valued is research that will yield information that can be used to train staff and improve the agency's services and outcomes. If researchers wish to recruit state VR agencies to participate in a research project, based on these responses, it is important that researchers clearly show how the projected results will provide information that can be used to increase the skills of staff and/or the agency's services and/or outcomes for its customers.

By far the primary source state VR agencies rely on is CSAVR, followed by a close grouping of federally funded Technical Assistance Centers, and the two federal agencies (NIDILRR and RSA) that are principal sponsors of vocational rehabilitation research (see Table 4). CSAVR has a procedure noted on our website for endorsing proposed research. We also send individual notices of research opportunities and

Table 3
What advantages do agencies expect from participating in research projects?

Advantages to participation	Responses
Information that can be used for training staff in my agency	35
Proven ideas for improving outcomes and services in my agency	26
Keep me informed about new developments in the VR field	26
Easy to use guides, toolkits, or other resources	22
Information to assist with legislative initiatives	21
Information to share with others	19
Information to help me do my job	17
Information to increase my personal skills and knowledge	12

Table 4
Where do you get your information about research projects and results?

Source	Responses
CSAVR website and communications	35
Rehabilitation Services Administration funded Technical Assistance Centers	24
National Institute on Disability Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research	22
Rehabilitation Services Administration website	17
Professional Journals	9
National Clearinghouse of Rehabilitation Training Materials	8
Google	8
National Rehabilitation Association	7

results to our members and note them in our weekly newsletter. It should be stated here that three other sources received one vote each. These included the Department of Labor website, "Partner agencies," and the DOL Employment and Training Administration's WorkforceGPS, an online technical assistance website dedicated to the public workforce system as a whole. RSA Technical Assistance Centers named individually were included in the total. We recognize a possible bias, as our members were responding to a CSAVR polling about source of information and listed CSAVR as the top source. At the same time, the results underscore the value of researchers working with CSAVR and getting its endorsement for any planned research involving state VR agencies and the public VR program. The respondents' answers also demonstrate the value of using CSAVR as a vehicle for sharing information and results from research projects with state VR agencies.

Table 5 shows suggestions to increase the research impact on innovation at the agency level. The top vote getters were research that will assist agencies to better

Table 5

What suggestions do you have to increase the research impact on innovation at the SVRA level?

Suggestions to increase research impact on SVRA innovation	Responses
Greater focus on meeting the needs of agencies versus publishing in journals	28
Ability to offer TA to agencies in executing or applying research findings to operations	27
Better coordination/cooperation among researchers to share data and reduce burden	22
Pulling data and solutions from other disciplines and professionals who have wrestled with issues facing VR	14
More concise communication of results	14

Table 6

What would entice you to participate in a research project in the future?

Enticements	Responses
Improves practices in my agency	31
Clear value to my agency	29
Opportunities to customize the research to meet my agency's needs	20
Greater input into the design and development of the research	8
Other	3
Opportunity for agency recognition	0

meet the needs of customers and staff, along with TA that will assist them in applying research results to their operations. These results reinforce the findings in response to the prior question about the advantages that agencies expect from their participation in research (see Table 4). The responses to this question again stress reducing the participation burden on agencies, involving the agency in crafting questions and designing the study, and noting participation by other agencies.

Respondents are looking for research that will add value to their agency and improve operations and results for customers (see Table 6). There were three comments under “Other” as follows: a) having personnel and resources to complete the research; b) reimbursement for staff time; and, c) assurance that results will be shared. One surprise was that no respondent was interested in agency recognition. This was the only question where we had an option listed that no respondent chose.

4. Conclusion

Having heard from state VR agency directors as to what motivates them or not to participate in research,

what have we learned? The following are our recommendations to researchers:

- Minimize the agency and staff burden of participation as much as possible.
- Gain an understanding of the environmental demands on state VR agencies.
- Be respectful and cognizant of the time and resource demands that research may place on the agency and their ability to meet them.
- Design research to identify or provide proven strategies or ideas that other state VR agencies can easily adapt to their operations.
- Provide guidance for pre-service and in-service training programs as well as TA resources that agencies can use to implement the research results if they so choose.
- Recognize that CSAVR serves as a main source to share information about research projects and the results. It may be a catalyst for encouraging cross-agency information exchanges as a member organization.
- Focus on providing research results that will be valuable and useful to VR agencies to improve their operations and results.
- Provide the results directly to the state VR agencies and not only via a professional journal.
- Share up front with the agency why you think there is a reasonable likelihood that your research will yield results that will be useful to the agency.
- Involve the agencies in the design of the research.

We conclude with this last thought: To be successful in recruiting state VR agencies to partner with researchers, the projected end result must be one that will clearly add value to the agency and improve its operations. In the spirit of Vision 2020, we have appreciated this opportunity to contribute to this special topic issue in this Journal. We want to thank our members who took their valuable time to provide us input. It is our hope that the information we have shared in this article based on the feedback directly from state VR agencies will be put to use by researchers to increase the participation by state VR agencies in future pertinent projects. Going back to the principles of Vision 2020, we also realize that greater participation by state VR agencies in research projects going forward will yield better data to guide agencies and the national program to be well prepared for the next 100 years.

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Conflict of interest

None to report.

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