Project SEARCH workshop to work: Participant reflections on the journey through career discovery

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Abstract.
BACKGROUND: Over recent years, New York State has engaged in efforts to transform the sheltered workshop system. Through this effort, a variety of innovative models have been piloted to assess effectiveness in supporting sheltered workshop participants to train for and transition to competitive employment in the community. One particular pilot program adapted the Project SEARCH high school transition model for this purpose.
OBJECTIVE: As part of a larger evaluation effort, this project aimed to document the individual growth of program participants, as well as their self-perceived readiness for employment.
METHODS: Ten individuals participated in a 12-month program, where they participated in up to four internships. Participants were interviewed multiple times, beginning at the start of the program, and again at the end of each internship. Interviews were video recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify common themes.
RESULTS: The career discovery process of exposure to community-based work opportunities, included as part of the Project SEARCH program, led to to an increased ability to express vocational strengths and self-determined career goals. Participants articulated a readiness to enter the workforce and demonstrated a desire to take on more personal and financial responsibility. The program model was successful in transitioning 63% of participants into competitive employment. However, successful transition was not achieved by participants who had been in the workshop for more than 5 years prior to entering the program.
CONCLUSION: Further research is needed to assess the appropriateness of the Project SEARCH model for those with the most significant disabilities who wish to transition from a workshop into competitive employment, particularly those individuals who have been in a workshop setting for an extended period of time.

Keywords: Employment, sheltered workshop conversion, program evaluation, transition, developmental disabilities, intellectual disabilities, Project SEARCH

1. Introduction

At the forefront of the current national dialogue in disability and employment is the validity and justness of the sheltered employment system. Individuals with the most significant disabilities have historically been placed in segregated, pre-vocational or non-work services and supports, largely due to outdated views regarding their ability to successfully engage and work in their communities. Facilities where people with disabilities congregate to perform work related tasks in a segregated setting, often paid a sub-minimum wage, have become commonly referred to as sheltered workshops. Sheltered workshops, and the sub-minimum wage for people with disabilities, have a long history in the United States.

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Segregated work settings have existed as early as the mid 1800's; and the payment of sub-minimum wages dates back to President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in which, by Executive Order, it became permissible to pay individuals with disabilities "below the minimum established by a Code" (Bates-Harris, 2012, p. 39). However, the sheltered workshop system, which was initially justified as a pre-vocational training opportunity and a stepping stone to employment in the community, has become an outdated approach that often results in the permanent placement of many capable workers with disabilities. In contrast, the modern and prevailing view embraces an Employment First philosophy, assuming competence and ensuring that "employment in the general workforce is the first and preferred outcome in the provision of publicly funded services for all working age citizens with disabilities, regardless of level of disability" (APSE, 2010).

In the more recent history of disability employment, prompted by updates to regulations and legislation in a number of states and at the Federal level, there has been a movement to close or convert sheltered workshops. However, the process has not been without its challenges. A variety of barriers to conversion have been noted, including funding concerns; limiting regulations; lack of staff expertise; and a lack of leadership in support of competitive, integrated employment for people with the most significant disabilities (Rogan, Held, & Rinne, 2001). Yet subsequent examination of early conversion and closure efforts indicate that it is both possible and beneficial to transform these setting. Bates-Harris (2012) noted that successful conversion results in more cost efficient and quality services, that people with disabilities are happier, provider agencies are able to develop better community and employer relations, and support staff report increased job satisfaction. Additionally, a qualitative study of six workshops that had recently completed the process of conversion noted seven key elements necessary for successful conversion. Organizations must have: an openness to risk taking, shared values that drive service delivery, an ongoing process of self-evaluation, linkages to external resources, a holistic focus on consumer needs, direct staff roles in organizational goals and decision-making, and an emphasis on continuous improvement (Butterworth, Fesko, & Ma, 2000).

Despite early successes and their corresponding positive outcomes, portions of the disability community, including some individuals and families, service providers and the service system at large, continue

to lag behind in fully embracing and promoting the possibility of competitive, integrated employment for all people, including those with the most significant disabilities. Rogan, Held and Rinne (2001) noted that the most significant barrier to conversion was negative attitudes among stakeholders; most notably family and staff. Sheltered workshops have understandably become a safe haven for families, because they represent safety for their adult son or daughter during the day. Yet research has demonstrated that individuals with the most significant disabilities can both safely and successfully live and work in their community. In fact, in a qualitative study of one agency's conversion process, Dague (2012) found that most families and participants were satisfied with the conversion process once completed. The key to a successful transition was finding acceptable and meaningful employment in the community and maintaining previous social networks.

As the shift away from sheltered employment continues, there is a need to identify successful models that can adequately assess individual support needs and provide appropriate training as individuals transition into community-based employment and services. Equally of importance is the need to ensure that self-determination remains at the forefront during this transition. However, little research is available to aid practitioners and policy makers in better understanding the experiences of individuals, especially those with the most significant disabilities, who are most personally impacted by the process of sheltered workshop conversion. This project aimed to document the opinions and perspectives of individuals with intellectual disabilities as they transitioned from a sheltered workshop towards competitive, integrated employment through participation in a year-long work readiness training program.

1.1. Background: The New York State context

Over the past decade New York State (NYS) has made steady progress in aligning state policies and agency regulatory guidance towards Employment First outcomes. New York has participated in and benefited from a myriad of collaborative initiatives that have furthered the goal of making employment for people with disabilities a priority and reality across the state, including the Partnerships in Employment (PIE) project, a Project of National Significance funded by the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. NYS PIE, which was funded from 2011–2016, focused on further aligning

systems and supports towards the goal of increasing employment outcomes for New Yorkers with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) through funding, developing and evaluating new models for transition-to-work via demonstration projects.

During the course of the NYS PIE project, the NYS Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) announced significant overarching systems reform, emphasizing employment as a priority. As part of the agency's transformational agenda, OPWDD announced that, effective July 1, 2013, no new admissions to sheltered workshops would be permitted. Additionally, OPWDD, in accordance with the Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) Final Rule issued by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS; Federal Register, 2011), outlined a multi-year strategy to transition people from sheltered workshops to competitive employment and/or other community activities. At the time of this announcement, there were 8,020 individuals participating in 113 sheltered workshops across the state (NYS OPWDD, 2014).

1.2. Addressing a community need through the adaptation of Project SEARCH

While some transition options, including the utilization of newly developed services and supports, were offered and suggested by OPWDD in the early stages of the transformational effort, community providers across the state faced a great challenge in identifying innovative and creative solutions at the local level to successfully transition individuals out of sheltered workshops. Through the NYS PIE project, potential new models for workshop-to-work transition were explored, and the adaptation of an already successful high school transition program, Project SEARCH, emerged as a promising approach.

Project SEARCH is a licensed transition-to-work model, developed at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center (Daston, Riehle, & Rutkowski, 2012). This business-led program, which has been successfully replicated over 300 times across the country, features total workplace immersion, and facilitates a seamless combination of classroom instruction, career exploration, and on-the-job training and support. The goal for each participant is competitive employment. Real-life work experiences, combined with training in employability and independent living skills, help youth and young adults with significant disabilities make successful

transitions to independent and productive lives in the community.

Replication of Project SEARCH was an already established goal and priority of the NYS PIE project to support successful high school transition. Fueled by positive preliminary outcome data from programs operating in Upstate NY at the start of NYS PIE, efforts were made to replicate and evaluate the program across the state. A longitudinal study of the impact of program participation on transition-to-work outcomes for students with IDD was conducted, providing further evidence of the positive impact of the model (Christensen, Hetherington, Daston, & Riehle, 2015). While Project SEARCH most typically operates as a high school transition program, the model has been successefully adapted to train post-school young adults for the workforce (Daston, Riehle, & Rutkoski, 2012). However, at the time that this demonstration project was initially planned and developed, there was no specific example of the Project SEARCH model being utilized to transition individuals from sheltered workshop settings into community-based, competitive employment.

2. Participants and program description

To develop the pilot project, a partnership was formed with a community rehabilitation provider operating a large sheltered workshop in Upstate NY. This same provider, via its supported employment program, had been a partner with the Project SEARCH high school transition initiative in NY for several years. Ten individuals, whose length of engagement in the sheltered workshop ranged from 2–10 years, took part in the Project SEARCH workshop-to-work pilot from June 2015 – June 2016. However, only nine of these program participants consented to be interviewed as part of the project evaluation. A description of the cohort's demographics is found in Table 1. There was a relatively equal gender split (60% male/40% female) among the participants, and the majority were Caucasian (70%). All participants (100%) had a primary diagnosis of intellectual disability (ID), with half having a secondary diagnosis of emotional disturbance (ED). One participant had a co-occurring visual impairment. The average length of participation in the sheltered workshop prior to entering the Project SEARCH program was 4.5 years.

Recruitment activities included a series of presentations to workshop participants, families and staff.

Table 1
Demographics of program participants (N = 10)

	N	%
Gender		
Male	6	60
Female	4	40
Race		
African American	2	20
Asian	1	10
Caucasian	7	70
Ethnicity		
Hispanic	2	20
Disability Classification (primary)		
Intellectual Disability	10	100
Disability Classification (secondary)		
Blind/Visually Impaired	1	10
Emotional Disturbance	5	50
Eligible to Receive Services from		
Vocational Rehabilitation	9	90
Developmental Disabilities/Medicaid	10	100

Adhering to Project SEARCH guidelines (Daston, Riehle, & Rutkowski, 2012), potential participants were identified through a collaborative selection process. Interested individuals submitted an application, which was reviewed by a committee made up of representatives from the host business (a hotel management chain), the community rehabilitation provider, vocational rehabilitation (ACCES-VR) and the state developmental disabilities agency (OPWDD). A subset of this committee interviewed the applicants and made selection decisions. The selection process was guided by several factors, including the stated desire of the applicant to participate, recommendations of the workshop staff, level of family support, and an agreed upon interest in pursuing competitive employment upon program completion. To participate in the program, applicants and families agreed that, upon program completion, participants would actively seek competitive, integrated employment in the community. Applicants and families also agreed that, in the event that an individual was not yet ready for competitive employment at program completion, the individual would work with ACCES-VR and/or OPWDD to identify an appropriate program or service to further their vocational training. Applicants and families agreed that returning to the workshop was not an allowable outcome.

The pilot project operated in three hotels, each within close proximity and owned by the same hotel management chain. The program followed Project SEARCH model fidelity guidelines (Daston, Riehle, & Rutkoski, 2012). However, a few modifications were made to better support the unique needs of individuals transitioning from a sheltered workshop environment. Instead of the typical 9-month, three-internship rotation approach common to Project SEARCH, the pilot program allowed up to four internships over the course of a full calendar year. Additionally, the program provided transportation for participants for an extended period at the start of the year, to allow for adequate travel training and accompanying safety assessments, and to provide adequate time to update the participants' individual service plans to better align with community-based services and supports.

3. Methods for evaluation

3.1. Consent process

At the start of the program year, the primary author met with the Project SEARCH interns and staff to fully explain the goals and logistics of this project. By agreeing to participate, the interns would be provided the opportunity to share their personal experiences in the program, as well as to provide feedback to the project team for the purposes of program improvement. It was stressed that participation was purely optional, and refusal to participate would have no impact on their continuing ability to take part in the program. Additionally, as the evaluation design was centered on a series of one-on-one, video recorded interviews, scheduled over the course of the full program year, it was further explained that the interns would have the option of opting out at any point without the need to provide an explanation for doing so. Nine out of ten Project SEARCH interns gave their consent to participate in the project. As all participants were of legal age and guardianship concerns were not an issue, families were informed of the project but were not specifically required to give consent.

3.2. Data collection

A semi-structured interview guide was developed by the primary author. Questions broadly probed for feedback regarding program participation, and sought to identify aspects of programming that participants found either particularly beneficial or not useful in meeting their individual goals. The interviews also served to capture and assess, over time, the participants' ability to describe their career goals, vocational strengths, and motivation for getting a job

in the community. While most of the interview questions were asked repeatedly throughout the project, separate interview guides were prepared for each interview, allowing for the flexibility of adding and eliminating questions as appropriate given the time within the program year that the interview was taking place. For example, during the first interview, at the start of the program year, questions were added to document each participant's experiences in the workshop and their specific motivations for becoming a Project SEARCH intern. Subsequent interviews included questions aimed at gauging readiness for employment and perceptions of growth as a result of program participation. During the fourth, and final, interview, additional questions were added to assess overall satisfaction in the participants' experiences in the program and to document outcomes related to the goal of competitive, integrated employment upon program completion.

The first interview took place during the first week of program in June 2015, with subsequent interviews scheduled at the end of each internship rotation (September and December of 2015 and February 2016). Interviews were scheduled during "workshop week," which is a scheduled break between internship rotations (Daston, Riehle, & Rutkoski, 2012). Each interview day was scheduled in advance, and interviews were conducted back-to-back on a single day. The interviews took place in a video recording studio on a university campus local to the Project SEARCH program. The interns self-selected the order in which they were interviewed, and had the option of having their job coach present during the interview if desired. The primary author conducted all of the interviews with the exception of those completed at the end of the second internship rotation. Due to a scheduling conflict, the second rotation interviews were facilitated by the second author.

Participant demographic information and employment outcomes were reported by the partner supported employment provider, and reflected information gathered from the program application and record review. This information was verified via the participant interviews.

3.3. Data analysis

The method used for data analysis was informed by previous qualitative work conducted by the first author (Christensen, 2014; Christensen et al., 2012; Holland et al., 2013; LeCuyer, Christensen, Kearney, & Kitzman, 2011). Utilizing an inductive content analysis approach (Elo & Kyngas, 2008), analyses began with a thorough review of each of the transcripts to gain an overarching familiarity with the opinions expressed by the program participants. Transcripts were then individually coded and analyzed by set, with all interviews conducted during a single time period representing a set (e.g., beginning of program, following the 1st internship, 2nd internship, etc.).

Coding and analysis was managed using ATLAS.ti. Additionally, Microsoft Excel was utilized to create a matrix of participant responses to aid in within- and cross-case analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The first author coded all transcripts to maintain continuity. Chunks of text, representing a complete thought on the part of the research participant, were used as the unit of analysis. A process of continual review of the code list was followed throughout the analyses. After the transcripts from a single set were coded, the code list was reevaluated to identify potential emerging categories, as well as to ensure that the analysis had not drifted away from the program evaluation questions. Researcher memos were written to capture early thoughts about potentially emerging themes. Those memos were then set aside pending analysis of the next set of transcripts. This process was repeated for each set of transcripts.

After all sets of transcripts were coded individually, they were then analyzed as a whole to group categories into broader conceptual themes. Additionally, all codes were entered into a spreadsheet, and compared across and within sets to identify new ideas that emerged over time (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003). The primary author developed researcher memos to document the analytic process, and built on these to write the preliminary analysis. The second author then reviewed the analysis for accuracy by checking the identified themes against the original transcripts.

Employment outcomes were reviewed and analyzed at the descriptive level.

4. Results

Four interviews were conducted during the project year. A total of nine program participants were interviewed at least once, and six interns were interviewed all four times. Eight interns participated in the first and second interviews, and seven interns participated in the third and fourth interviews. Two interns

dropped from the program, one each following the second and third internship rotations, so were not interviewed toward the end of the program. A new intern began the program mid-year, and only participated in the fourth interview.

The length of interviews varied over time. The first interviews were, on average, the shortest (approx. 7 minutes), with the second interviews being the longest (approx. 13 minutes). There was a noted drop in the length of the third interviews (approx. 8 minutes), which were conducted by a different interviewer. However, there was not a significant increase in average interview time for the fourth interview (approx. 8.5 minutes), despite being led by the original interviewer.

4.1. First interviews (June 2015)

The initial interview took place during the first week of the program, prior to the start of the internship rotations. As of the time of the interviews, program participants had taken a tour of the host business and had begun to complete necessary onboarding activities. Eight interns were interviewed.

The participants spoke of their motivations for joining the program. All but one of the participants talked about getting out into the community as a primary motivation for participation, with the majority (6 out of 8) indicating that getting a job was an anticipated outcome. Additionally, most participants (5 out of 8) noted that a community-based job would lead to higher earnings than they were receiving in the workshop. One participant responded that he joined Project SEARCH "so I can make money and enjoy myself. They're helping us get a. . . that's what they're helping us to do is. . . I wanna get another job, out in the community" (P6, 27-year-old male). Another participant added that Project SEARCH was an opportunity to "try something different. We work in the community, make more money" (P2, 45-year-old female).

Despite the interviews taking place at the start of the program, all participants were able to articulate some type of a career goal or interest. For some, they entered the program with very specific goals, noting that these would require more training than what Project SEARCH was prepared to offer. For example, one participant noted, "One thing I really wanted to do was police work, but that's gonna take lots of training" (P3, 25-year-old male); while another participant contributed, "I wanna do. . . be a veterinarian assistant. Do somethin' with pets, animals. . . but, I know

that's gonna be way back. But as long as I have something to go forward, it'll be alright" (P4, 33-year-old female). Half of the participants (4 out of 8) expressed interest in working in a hotel. "I wanna try to get into maintenance work, with the hotels and. . . I can't wait to start that on Monday but (smiling, shrugs), I'm kinda excited," said one participant (P6, 27-year-old male). It should be noted that the host business for this program is a hotel management group, and the participants took a tour of one of the host hotels to learn about possible internships the day before the interviews took place.

While program staff anticipated a noticeable level of fear or worry on the part of program participants, especially at this early stage in the program, only one participant noted any specific concerns. For him, concerns about leaving his friends at the workshop was the particular issue.

> Pretty. . . it was, I was a little. . . the first day when I came to Project Search, I didn't, I didn't feel comfortable. . . I didn't, I didn't feel, I didn't feel. . . I didn't, I didn't, I didn't. . . I didn't feel comfortable at first. I didn't, I didn't know any people. I didn't know. . . I didn't know nobody here at first. (P7, 26-year-old male).

All participants struggled during the interview to answer questions posed by the interviewer. When unsure how to answer, participants would simply answer, "I don't know," or would not respond at all. Only one participant demonstrated skills to ask for clarification or seek help. At one point, this participant asked the interviewer to repeat the question; while at another point in the interview, she looked to her job coach for help: "Um. . . (pause), Um. . . (looks off to the side where the job coach is sitting), I need help here" (P1, 25-year-old female). In general, there was more reliance on support from the job coach at this point in the program, as almost all participants (6 out of 8) asked to have their job coach present during the interview.

Also of note during these initial interviews was the level of self-awareness participants demonstrated related to personal factors that presented as barriers to successful employment. For example, one participant set a goal of learning to speak louder, while another participant aimed to make better eye contact. Others noted soft skills goals, such as "staying on focus" (P3, 25-year-old male) or time management.

P4 (33-year-old female): Um, just. . . probably like patience and like. . . schedule wise, time off, just um. . . punctuation.

Interviewer: Okay. So, like being on time and knowing where you need to be?

P4: Yeah (nodding head).

Interviewer: Okay. Is that something that's a little difficult for you?

P4: Yeah (nodding head).

For one participant, Project SEARCH offered an opportunity to break past the barriers that he experienced in previous attempts to get and maintain a job in the community due to a visual impairment.

Um. . . maybe I'll look for a job. . . and. . . hopefully I'll. . . hopefully one day I can find me a job that, that works, that a. . . that, that um. . . that work, that work um. . . that will work out. My um, my um. . . my vision skills, and see what I can do, and see what I can't. . . and see what I can't do. . . (P7, 26-year-old male).

4.2. Second interviews (September 2015)

The second interview took place immediately following the completion of the first internship rotation. The eight participants who participated in the first interview all participated in the second. All participants indicated that they liked the program and thought that they made a good decision to participate. Additionally, none of the participants noted any fears or worries regarding participation in the program moving forward. In fact, the one participant who had expressed concerns at the start of the program about leaving his friends in the workshop exclaimed, "Project SEARCH is awesome!" (P7, 26-year-old male), when asked how he was feeling now that he had completed a full internship rotation

At this point in the program, participants were focused on goals for greater independence. One participant noted,

But now, I just wanna be more independent like, how to get my driver's license 'n. . . my permit 'n. . . I'm just not ready to drive, but I wanna be. . . next. . . probably next year, I'll probably get ready for Drivers Ed or somethin'" (P6, 27-year-old male).

Another participant shared that, "My goal in 5 years is, I want me a job, a new place, and have joint

custody of my daughter." (P4, 33-year-old female). Still another intern talked about moving away from home. "Um, I'd really like to live in New York City. I love New York City because, um, I have a friend who moved down there" (P1, 25-year-old female).

Upon completion of the first internship rotation, almost all of the participants (7 out of 8) articulated a desire to work in a hotel. Having had early success in their internships, participants described their hopes to be hired at the host business or in a similar location.

I am lookin' forward to work at the. . . one of the hotels, but I'm not really sure what one I'm gonna be. . . I'm hopin' like doin' maintenance work for. . . cleaning one of the rooms for. . . um, the guest that comes in there 'n stays. Um, I just like to work at a hotel (P6, 27-year-old male).

Half of the program participants (4 out of 8) began to make comparisons between expectations in the program versus what they were experiencing in the workshop.

It's a great. . . it's a wonderful program, it's a great program, and it teaches you values and teaches you, you know. . . you have to be a certain way, act a certain way, you cannot. . . like at [the workshop], they don't care. This is not no joke. This is not playtime. This is. . . no (shakes head, giggles, smiles) This is real life. [The workshop] is just a playground, so. . . this is real life. You're gonna have to get up, get dressed, you have to go. . . you can't not just go in whatever you're wearing, you have to wear a uniform. Like at [the workshop], they could go in whatever they want to for attire, and not at, um Project SEARCH. You have to be more adult about it, instead of, you know. . . You have more responsibilities then you do at. . . with Project SEARCH than [the workshop]. You have more responsibilities to yourself, and to coworkers who rely on you. Even though it's an internship, you're still helping, you know, do the job . . . um, helping them do the job what they need to do even though it's just an intern. . . you, you're an extra pair of hands, to help them. And they appreciate it, and then you get the appreciation of getting the experiences that you haven't had in months or years. So, yeah. . . (P4, 33-year-old female).

Participants also began to acknowledge differences between being out in the community learning job skills versus what they were learning while in the workshop. For some, Project SEARCH simply

offered an opportunity to try new things. For others, a community-based work experience was an opportunity to be challenged, noting that their participation in the workshop was not teaching them anything new. As one participant noted, "They get more experience for the community, because. . . through [the workshop], that was so. . . I had all the experience there before, when I was in high school" (P3, 25-year-old male).

All participants expressed a desire to get a job at the end of the program. Making money was higher at the forefront of discussion than it was during the previous interviews. It should be noted that participants were not paid to participate in Project SEARCH, so the impact of not receiving their paycheck from the workshop was first experienced during this internship rotation. The lack of a paycheck was added motivation to complete the program, as one participant noted, "Um, hopefully, I won't be doin' this for a full year. I wanna get employment within, in like, at least 6 months" (P6, 27-year-old male). However, the lack of a paycheck was not a significant issue, as participants indicated an understanding that participation in Project SEARCH was a personal investment, and recognized that the training they were receiving was going to lead to making more money in the long-run. One participant offered, "So, they can teach you different things from [the workshop] and you make more money when they hire you" (P2, 45-year-old female). The Project SEARCH experience was viewed as a stepping stone to successful transition into a community-based job and greater independence in a way that the workshop had not been. "Yeah. . . I'm ready and willing to be out, get a job, paying job, " one participant said. "I'm ready now. I. . . I been ready" (P4, 33-year-old female).

After completing the first internship, participants began to independently express an understanding of what employers expect. Beyond the specific skills needed to do the job, participants were well aware of the importance of the soft skills that they were learning in the program as necessary for success. "I'm a hard worker, good worker. . . all day, every day. Monday through Friday," noted one participant (P2, 45-year-old female). Additionally, all participants spoke about the importance of good attendance and being on time. When asked why an employer should consider hiring him, one participant responded, "I'm always on time, um. . . my good attendance is always good. Um. . . I'm always here, not usually. . . I'm not sick at all, so I'm usually here" (P7, 26-year-old male). It should be noted that soft skills development is a particular emphasis of the Project SEARCH

program, and aspects like attendance and reliability are heavily emphasized from the first day of program. In fact, participants were expected to maintain 95% attendance to maintain their spot in the program, keeping in accordance with Project SEARCH guidelines (Daston, Riehle, & Rutkowski, 2012).

At the end of the first internship, there was an increase in the level of self-awareness related to the types of jobs or work environment in which the participants felt they might excel. One participant noted, "I want a job at nighttime. . . that's when I'm more awake" (P3, 25-year-old male). For one participant, this level of self-awareness was also applied to selecting the next internship rotation, in an attempt to achieve a better fit than what she experienced during the first rotation.

> I think that would be a better suit for me 'cause then I get to be movin' around. In the [last rotation] I was just standing there. . . and now my second rotation I'll be actually moving around, so I won't be bored. (P4, 33-year-old female).

One noted benefit of participation in the program at this point was the level of confidence that participants were developing on the job. One participant noted, "I got confidence in every. . . in everything I do" (P7, 26-year-old male). Another participant added, "I've learned about myself that I am confident, I am brave and I am strong" (P1, 25-year-old female). Confidence was also noted in the significant increase in the number of participants who asked the interviewer for clarification when they were confused by an interview question. While only one participant asked for the question to be repeated or restated a different way during the first interviews, more than half (5 out of 8) did so during the second interviews. As was the case during the first interviews, all participants had trouble at some point with understanding or answering the interviewer's questions. However, during these second interviews, participants pondered the questions rather than quickly and simply answering "I don't know" as was observed earlier.

4.3. Third interviews (December 2015)

The third set of interviews marked the half-way point of the program. One participant had dropped out of the program by this point, so seven interns were interviewed. For the first time during this project, none of the participants asked for their job coach to be present during the interviews. Additionally, there were fewer instances of the participants feeling

uncertain how to answer a question posed by the interviewer. It should be noted that the third set of interviews were facilitated by the second author, resulting in a slight deviation in style and approach in comparison to all other sets of interviews conducted for this project. Additionally, the second author had more direct familiarity with the program participants than the first author.

All participants spoke about a desire to get a job when they completed the program, and most (5 out of 7) also talked about making money in the future. As one intern expressed it, "My hopes for the future are having... making good money" (P5, 45-year-old male). In addition to simply making money, participants began to articulate ideas about things that they might like to do once they are earning a paycheck. One participant was excited to spend his paycheck on getting a new tattoo. "Because I already got one picked out. But I gotta wait a little bit longer," he said. "Like in the summer time, until I can get a check" (P3, 25-year-old male). Another intern, who'd mentioned the desire to save his money in an earlier interview, noted that, "Maybe I'll go shopping" (P6, 27-year-old male).

Participants had more concrete ideas for the types of jobs they were interested in pursuing after the program ended, and spoke of places that they would like to work with more specificity. While in previous interviews the interns spoke of general types of jobs that interested them, they had now begun to name companies that they would enjoy working for. For example, more than half (4 out of 7) expressed a desire to work at a local grocery store chain. However, it should be noted that the group toured the grocery store just prior to these interviews as part of their workshop week activities. Participants also continued to express an interest in working in one of the hotels where the Project SEARCH program is located, or in a similar location.

Self-awareness was, again, demonstrated by the participants, and they identified specific goals for necessary growth during the remainder of the program year. All participants noted individual areas for improvement that represented barriers to entering the workforce. "I've really got to work on taking good constructive criticism," one participant noted. "Because I'll take it the wrong way and I'll get mad for it" (P3, 25-year-old male). For another intern, this level of self-awareness extended to a recognition that he was not yet ready to enter the workforce and needed more time in the program. "Not... not....not right now. Because I got... I gotta work on... I gotta

work on... I gotta... I gotta work on a little bit on my, um... my, um... my, um... my communication skills again" (P6, 27-year-old male). However, the majority of the interns (5 out of 7) stated that they felt that they were ready to begin looking for a job and leave the program. All remaining participants, at this mid-way point, indicated that they were happy with the program, and that participation in the program had benefited them in ways that their experiences in the sheltered workshop had not. One participant noted, "Before, in [the workshop], I was a little bit in trouble with drama. Now I am better at... with um, getting along with my peers" (P1, 25-year-old female). Another participant noted, "It taught me how to control my anger. . . . It also taught me that I can concentrate when I want to" (P3, 25-year-old male).

A few participants began to reflect on aspects of the program that made the transition out of the workshop easier for them. In particular, being able to complete the program as a group helped to ease their fears and discomfort. One participant noted that, despite being initially afraid to leave the workshop, he was glad that he decided to participate in the program because "I get to enjoy my day with my friends" (P7, 26-year-old male).

4.4. Fourth interviews (February 2016)

By the time of the fourth and final round of interviews, the program was beginning to wind down. Two participants had already been offered competitive jobs, both by the host business. One participant had received a job offer just prior to this final interview. For him, the Project SEARCH experience not only prepared him to transition from the workshop to competitive employment, but gave him a sense of pride in knowing that he'd accomplished his goal.

> [My mom's] like, "I can't believe you did this on your own," and I'm like, "Yeah." I want to do something on my own. I don't want to be like sitting back and waitin' on everybody to tell me what's goin' on. I'm like, "No. I'm not gonna be doin' like that. I wanna be... I wanna be on my own." I just wanna be on my own, like working, and my mom's like, "You sure you wanna do this?" I'm like, "Yeah I was... I was ready for this." (P6, 27-year-old male).

For those participants who remained, there was a unified expression of confidence that they had learned what they needed to know and were ready for employment. "I feel I am. Yes, I'm ready," stated one intern

(P7, 26-year-old male). He went on to say, "Well, you know, just doin' the job. You know we started our rotation jobs, that's... that's how I got the skills to know what I'm doin'. So, it helped." The interns also noted that participation in the program helped them achieve those personal goals that had been noted as barriers to employment in the past. As one intern explained, "Project SEARCH has taught me to not be social, like being appropriate. So, right now I am working on my, um, appropriate social behavior" (P1, 25-year-old female).

Participants talked about how life might be different after Project SEARCH, when they have a job and are making a paycheck. For some, making their own living represented freedom to live where they want and to do the things they want to do.

P5 (45-year-old male): Getting the housing, yes.

Interviewer: Do you want to move?

P5: Yes.

Interviewer: You want to live on your own?

P5: (breathes deeply) Yes.

"Uh, it also taught me about money," stated another intern. "Uh, to save my money for things I want" (P1, 25-year-old female). However, beyond noting paid employment as a pathway to personal and financial independence, participants began to note their fiscal responsibilities as a member of the general workforce. One participant noted that he planned to help with the household bills once he received his first paycheck. "Yep, then I'm gonna help my mom do bills or whatever has to be paid" (P6, 27-year-old male). Another participant expressed a desire to pay her own way instead of relying on Medicaid benefits, noting that she'd use her paycheck to "pay for rent room and board, 'cause the state's payin' for it now" (P2, 45-year-old female).

While the participants acknowledged fears and worries at earlier points in the program, the conversation had shifted to a willingness to take risks. Participants acknowledged that being in the program was hard at first, especially in terms of having to leave friends behind at the workshop. However, they reflected that they'd been able to make new friends through their work experiences in the community.

I made new friends and yeah... it was hard for, well leavin', uh, [the workshop], but it was worth it cause I met more, um, yeah... I get to meet more people and work with different people, so it's

kinda fun. And everybody likes me so... of course everybody likes me, but, um... yeah it was just kinda hard for me to leave friends. But now, I got different friends now, and I like where I'm working at. People are nice, co-workers, supervisors, they all... if you got any concerns or anything comin' up you can talk to them. You can talk to anybody about what's goin' on at work (P6, 27-year-old male).

All of the participants expressed happiness in their decision to participate in Project SEARCH. One intern noted.

Yes, I'm happy that I, that I've been in Project SEARCH. Cause, I like... I like... I like it when um... I like it because they... they teachin me... they teachin me... they teach me more... more... more, um... more work... more, um... more skills than I ever have before" (P7, 26-year-old male).

Another intern added, "I'm just glad that I was part of it so far, and I'm enjoying myself, learning and new skills and new challenges" (P9, 51-year-old male).

4.5. *Employment outcomes*

The intent of this project was to elicit the thoughts and reflections of participants of a workshop-to-work transition program. As such, program outcomes were not a specific focus of this study except as they relate to participant feedback and satisfaction. However, completion and employment outcomes were collected and reported as additional context (Tables 2 and 3). Ten individuals participated in the program, with eight (80%) completing the program. Of those who completed, 63% successfully transitioned into community-based employment, working an average of 17.6 hours per week (range: 2–40 hours) at $9.25/hour (range: $9-$10). The host business hired 40% of those who successfully transitioned into a job. Additionally, of the two participants who were offered a job prior to completing the full program, both were hired by the host business. The age range of participants who made a successful transition into competitive employment was 25–51 years. Additionally, all of these individuals had been in the workshop no longer than 5 years. None of the participants who had been in the workshop for more than 5 years prior to entering Project SEARCH successfully transitioned into competitive jobs in the community.

Table 2
Program completion rates and initial employment outcomes

	N	%
# of participants	10	
# Completed the program	8	80
# Employed at graduation	2	25
(% of completers employed by or before program completion)		
# Hired by host business	2	100
(% of those employed at graduation)		

5. Summary of findings

This study provides further evidence of the value of the career discovery process for individuals transitioning out of sheltered employment. The fact that the program was embedded in a business in the community, and also emphasized learning about other job opportunities in the community (e.g., touring local businesses), had a direct impact on the participants' views of possible careers in the future. For example, as this program took place in a hotel setting, almost all participants expressed an interest in working in a hotel as early as the end of the 1st internship. Later in the year when the participants were interviewed after the opportunity to tour a local grocery store, half of the respondents expressed a desire to work there. This demonstrates that individuals with significant disabilities can imagine themselves working in the community when they are exposed to a variety of career opportunities and can directly see and understand what the job entails. Participation in Project SEARCH afforded the opportunity for career discovery for those who had little opportunity in the past. As their exposure to various positions within the hotel setting and in the community expanded, so did their career interests and goals.

Over the course of the program year, there was a shift in participants' goals related to achieving greater personal independence. From the start of the program, moving out and living independently were consistent themes expressed across the cohort. Additionally, some interns had more specific and personal motivation to get a job, such as regaining custody of a child. As time went on, participants began to connect employment with having the means to enjoy leisure activities and live a life out in the community. Competitive employment meant earning more money than they were receiving in the workshop; and a paycheck was viewed as opening doors to shopping, attending sporting events, spending time with friends and traveling to new places. However, towards the end of the program, participants demonstrated an increased awareness of employment as a means to take greater responsibility as a productive member of their household and the community. Competitive employment now represented the means to earn wages in order to pay their own bills and not have to rely on Medicaid benefits.

It has been noted in the literature that one of the fears individuals face when leaving the workshop is the potential loss of friendships and the social network that are created in the workshop setting (Migliore Grossi, Mank, & Rogan, 2008). The cohort model of Project SEARCH created an effective buffer, as it allowed ten individuals to exit the workshop and transition into a community setting with familiar peers. The majority of the interns' day was not spent together, as they were in individual internships at various locations. However, having the familiarity of friends and acquaintances at the start and end of their day alleviated some of the initial fears of losing friends as a result of leaving the workshop. Over time, the participants began to recognize

Table 3
Program outcomes by participant

	Gender	Age	Years in Workshop	Completed program	Obtained employment*	# Hours/week working	Wage/Hour	Hired by host business
P1	F	25	4 yrs	Yes	Yes	2	$10.00	N
P2	F	45	10 yrs	Yes	No			
P3	M	25	5 yrs	No	n/a			
P4	F	33	2 yrs	No	n/a			
P5	M	45	5 yrs	Yes	Yes	20	$9.00	Y
P6	M	27	7 months	Yes	Yes	20	$9.00	Y
P7	M	26	5 yrs	Yes	Yes			
P8	F	32	9 yrs	Yes	No			
P9	M	51	2 yrs	Yes	No	6	$9.25	N
P10	M	25	3 yrs	Yes	Yes	40	$9.00	N
AVERAGE				80%	63%	17.6	$9.25	40%

*Calculated based on % of program completers.

their coworkers on their internship sites as a new and extended social network, and this concern all but diminished.

The development of advocacy skills are embedded throughout the Project SEARCH curriculum, and participants practice these skills both in the classroom setting and on the job site. Growth in the ability to identify needs and ask for help was specifically noted during the interviews. For example, at the start of the program, only one intern exhibited the ability to ask for help when unsure of how to answer an interview question. Additionally, participants commonly responded with a dismissive "I don't know" when they were unsure what was being asked of them. However, as the year progressed, there was a steady increase in the interns' ability to ask for help when needed, and a decrease in simply dismissing the question. It should also be noted that the all but one of participants requested the support of a job coach to accompany them for the first interview. However, by the end of the year, none of the interns desired to have their job coach present for the final interviews.

Adult program guidance from Project SEARCH caps the age limit at 35 (Daston, Riehle, & Rutkowski, 2012). However, for this pilot project, applications were taken from workshop participants of any age. The overarching program evaluation goal was to explore the appropriateness of the adapted model relative to its ability to transition individuals, regardless of age, out of sheltered workshops and into competitive, integrated employment. For the cohort engaged in this pilot, age of the participant did not appear to have an impact on successful transition. However, time spent in the workshop may have been a factor. All participants who made a successful transition to employment had engaged in the workshop for 5 years or less. Neither of the two individuals who had spent the most time in the workshop (9–10 years) prior to participation in Project SEARCH made a successful transition.

Overall, the pilot program was effective, with 62.5% of those who completed the program having successfully transitioned into community-based employment. While this shows promise relative to the appropriateness of utilizing the Project SEARCH model to address sheltered workshop transformation, it should be noted that the outcomes of this pilot are significantly lower than the 83% success rate achieved within in the same community for the high school model of Project SEARCH (Christensen et al., 2015). This suggests that there may be a need to incorporate additional program enhancements to

support the unique needs of individuals who are entering the workforce from a sheltered employment environment.

5.1. Limitations and opportunities for future research

There are several limitations to this evaluation that are important to note. This project was part of an evaluation of a single pilot program operating in Upstate New York. As a result, the sample size is small and localized. While the results of this study provide some level of insight regarding the experiences of individuals with IDD who are transitioning from a sheltered workshop into competitive, integrated employment, the views expressed by program participants are limited to their own unique experiences.

Additionally, this evaluation was completed during the first year of program implementation, and results were likely influenced by a general sense of uncertainly felt by program participants and staff related to day-to-day operations and anticipated program outcomes. Furthermore, the approach used to conduct the interviews had an additional potential to influence responses. Participants were interviewed in a video recording studio at an unfamiliar setting at a local university, thus contributing an additional element of insecurity and discomfort. The majority of the interviews were conducted by an interviewer who was relatively unknown to the participants. The exception to this was the third set of interviews, which were conducted by a different interviewer who did have more familiarity with the participants. Participant responses might have been further influenced by this change in interviewers mid-way through the project.

While the interview questions were not provided in advance, it was impossible to assess the level to which participants were prepped by program staff prior to the interviews, and the extent to which this preparation may have been motivated by the desire for the program to appear successful during the first year of implementation. Finally, results would have been strengthened by member checking, a process in qualitative research of reporting the results of the analyses back to the individuals interviewed in order to confirm that the conclusions reached are a accurate representation of their views (Sandelowski, 1993). However, this was not possible in this study for a number of logistical reasons.

The results reported here would be strengthened by studying a larger number of programs that cover

a wider geographic area. Furthermore, the ability to study a program like this over an extended period of time would provide a more adequate assessment of the impact of the model on employment outcomes and job retention. A full-scale study, comparing Project SEARCH outcomes to other workshop-to-work transition programs, is necessary in order to make any substantiated claims regarding the effectiveness of the model as an intervention in successfully transitioning sheltered workshop participants into community-based employment. With a full-scale study, particular attention should be paid to the adequacy of the model, including the timeframe and intensity of supports, in terms of meeting the needs of those individuals with more significant disabilities, older workers, and those who have been engaged in the sheltered workshop system for an extended period of time.

6. Recommendations and conclusion

A strength of Project SEARCH is the career discovery process embedded within the program model. This was of particular value for individuals transitioning out of the sheltered workshop environment who had limited exposure to community-based career possibilities in the past. However, as Project SEARCH takes place in one host business, career discovery was limited within a single business sector. Exposure to a wider array of jobs in the community, beyond offering tours of nearby businesses, would allow the interns to explore other opportunities and interests. Although it was not incorporated into this pilot project, the Project SEARCH high school transition model supports having participants complete their final internship at an alternate business in the community when it is a fit for the individual's stated career interests. Incorporating this approach within the workshop-to-work model would allow for greater job exposure and skill building opportunities.

The cohort model of Project SEARCH provided familiarity and continuity as participants transitioned into an unfamiliar setting. However, as the Project SEARCH model emphasizes individualized internship placements, the cohort approach of the model provides a buffer during the transition but does not emulate an enclave or promote continued social dependency.

Finally, this evaluation demonstrated that participants gained an increased ability to articulate vocational strengths and self-determined career goals over time as a result of participation in Project SEARCH. Yet while this adaptation of Project SEARCH was successful in transitioning individuals who had been in a sheltered workshop for up to 5 years into competitive employment, it may not be adequate to address the needs of individuals who have been in a workshop setting for an extended period of time. It is necessary to further identify needed supports and programmatic enhancements that would ensure that all program participants are set up for a successful transition. Regardless, this study adds to the building body of evidence that transition out of segregated, congregate work settings into competitive employment in the community is possible for those with the most significant disabilities.

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Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to report.

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