

## Comparing State Vocational Rehabilitation Agency Support of Higher Education Access for People with Intellectual and Other Disabilities

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Understanding the role of state vocational rehabilitation agencies (SVRAs) in promoting postsecondary education is critical for professionals and policymakers who determine if postsecondary education options will be made available to youth with intellectual disabilities (ID) and other disabilities. This Fast Fact describes the primary findings of a recent study that examined SVRAs' engagement with students with disabilities to support postsecondary education.

By building academic, soft, and social skills, post-secondary education is critical for finding and retaining jobs for individuals with ID that satisfy their aspirations and pay competitive wages (Getzel & Wehman, 2005; Grigal & Hart, 2013). Even in the absence of earning diplomas, people exposed to postsecondary education are more likely to find jobs that pay better wages compared to their peers who did not have postsecondary education experiences (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003; Leonhardt, 2011; Marcotte, Bailey, Borkoski, & Kienzl, 2005). Findings show that youth who exited the vocational rehabilitation (VR) program after receiving postsecondary education services reported higher weekly wages compared to their peers who did not receive any postsecondary education services (Gilmore et al., 2001; Migliore, Butterworth, & Hart, 2009).

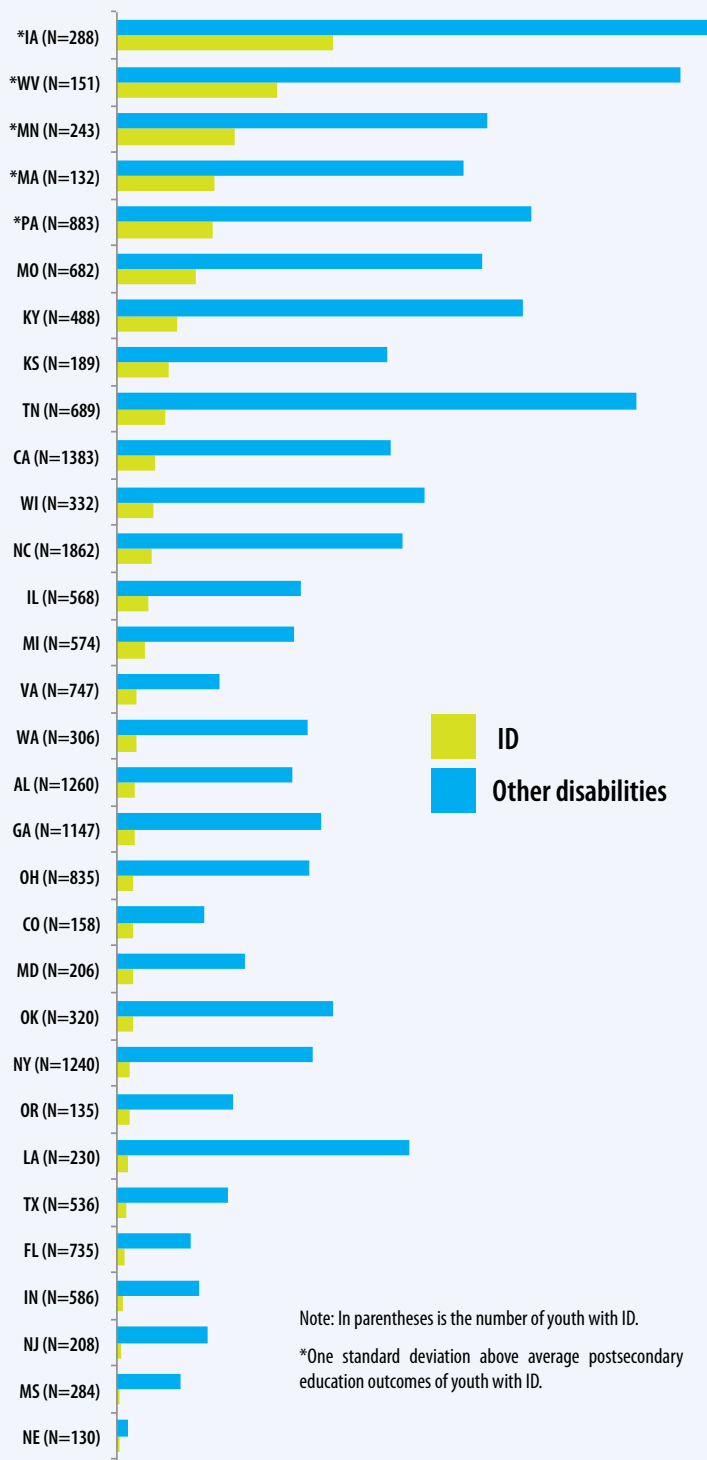
The connection between higher education and employment for people with disabilities is a growing area of study. In particular, there has been an increased focus in funding and expansion of higher education programs for students with intellectual disability. A recent secondary analysis of the RSA 911 dataset looked at participation rates and postsecondary education outcomes of youth with ID who exited the VR program in recent years (Grigal, Migliore, & Hart, 2014). This study addressed the following research questions:

- (1) During their time in the VR program, to what extent did youth with ID participate in postsecondary education, compared to youth with other types of disabilities?
- (2) Which states reported a higher percentage of youth with ID who participated in postsecondary education?
- (3) What trends were evident in postsecondary education participation for students with disability between 2006 and 2010?

### METHODS

The main outcome variable investigated in this study was participation in postsecondary education. This was defined as exiting the VR program with one of the following educational statuses: (a) postsecondary education, no degree; (b) associate's degree or vocational/technical certificate; (c) bachelor's degree; or (d) master's or higher degree. In addition, we examined demographic variables such as gender, race, ethnicity, disability benefits, and education at application.\*

Figure 1. Average percentage of youth reporting postsecondary education participation: 2006–2010



## KEY FINDINGS

### Comparisons across disability

A substantially lower percentage of youth with ID exited state VR programs reporting postsecondary education participation (4%) compared to youth with other disabilities (23%) during the period 2006–2010. Of those youth with ID who reported participating in postsecondary education, 57% pursued postsecondary education without attaining a degree (57%); 41% reported earning an associate's degree, vocational certificate, or technical certificate; and 2% earned a bachelor's degree.

Fifty-four percent of youth with other disabilities attended postsecondary education without gaining a degree; 28% gained an associate's degree, a vocational certificate, or a technical certificate; and 18% received a bachelor's degree or higher.

### Comparisons across states

The postsecondary education participation of youth with ID varied substantially across states (see Fig. 1). Several states reported close to 0% of youth with ID who exited VR having gained postsecondary education experiences, whereas 5 states reported at least 1 standard deviation above average: Massachusetts (10%), Pennsylvania (10%), Minnesota (12%), West Virginia (16%), and Iowa (22%).

Participation in postsecondary education was substantially different across states in the case of youth with other disabilities as well, from 1% in Nebraska to 60% in Iowa. 5 states reported at least 1 standard deviation above average: Kentucky (41%), Pennsylvania (42%), Tennessee (53%), West Virginia (57%), and Iowa (60%). In contrast, 5 other states reported figures that were at least 1 standard deviation below the average: Nebraska (1%), South Carolina (2%), Mississippi (6%), Florida (8%), and Indiana (8%).

## TRENDS OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION PARTICIPATION

- Youth with ID were substantially less likely to participate in postsecondary education compared to youth with other disabilities.
- The postsecondary education participation varied substantially across states.
- At the national level, postsecondary education participation remained static between 2006 and 2010, despite positive trends in several states.
- The percentage of youth with ID who participated in postsecondary education was strongly correlated with the participation rates for youth with other disabilities.

## IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study indicate that greater support of students with disabilities in general is associated with

greater engagement with youth with ID. The disparity between the states and lack of growth in postsecondary education participation of VR clients overall demonstrates that continued efforts should be aimed at further developing partnership between VR and institutes of higher education to support all students with disabilities. Postsecondary education can be a path toward better outcomes and can lead to increased levels of paid integrated employment for people with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities, and VR can have a role in building and sustaining that pathway.

**\*Author's note:** To increase the accuracy of state-level comparisons, the analysis was limited to states that reported at least 100 eligible youth with ID in each of the years between 2006–2010. 32 state VR programs reported at least 100 eligible youth in each of the years between 2006 and 2010, and were therefore included in the data analysis.

## READ THE FULL STUDY:

Grigal, M., Migliore, A., & Hart, D. (2014). A state comparison of vocational rehabilitation support of youth with intellectual disabilities' participation in postsecondary education. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 40*, 185–194. DOI:10.3233/JVR-140683. IOS Press

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