Introduction: Disability and Employment in the United States

According to the 2012 American Community Survey, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, youth and young adults with cognitive disabilities are facing over 80% unemployment in the United States. As states across the country address this issue, many of them are making an official commitment called Employment First. This means that community-based employment is the first option considered for an individual with a disability.

For the Employment First commitment to be realized, it requires a state provider system run by highly committed, rigorously trained staff. Within the Federal Government, there’s a great deal of interest around disability and employment, with new resources available to states to examine community employment options. A number of efforts focused on staff development and systemic change are addressing these new employment priorities, both nationally and on the individual state level.
Partnerships in Employment: A National Initiative

Through a grant from the Administration on Developmental Disabilities, the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) at the University of Massachusetts Boston and the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services (NASDDDS) have created a technical assistance center called Partnerships in Employment (PIE). PIE is a system change effort focused on helping states increase their employment opportunities for youth and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

For the next three years, the PIE Technical Assistance Center will be available to eight states—Alaska, California, Iowa, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, Tennessee, and Wisconsin—and practices being shared, discussed, and implemented across the PIE network.

Associates from the ICI and NASDDDS will visit each state annually to assess its policies and practices. These consultants will support state agencies to develop work plans, as well as encourage state-to-state collaboration. The PIE Technical Assistance Center will also produce various products and publications, hold monthly webinars, and have on hand a library of documents and tools to help assist with these complex systems changes.
Youth and young adults with disabilities are one of the populations targeted by systems-change efforts such as PIE. In a 2012 PIE report called *Investing in Our Future: Youth, Employment and Post-Secondary Opportunities*, ICI researchers note that 57% of developmental disability councils nationwide are planning to dedicate internal staff time toward addressing youth employment.

According to the PIE website, some of the key indicators of high-performing states include clearly articulating their employment mission, goals, and operating policies, and developing a consortium consisting of key stakeholders invested in PIE’s mission. The consortium includes state agency leaders, individuals with intellectual disabilities, family members, teachers, service providers, and employers. This level of self-assessment will help usher in a new era of employment and secondary education for youth and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Leadership is another indicator of excellence as states create new work opportunities. PIE states have made a commitment to becoming a “champion for employment.” This entails fostering an environment in which policy development occurs, leading to successful post-secondary outcomes such as vocational education, college, and competitive employment.

The focus of the PIE project is to scrutinize transition issues—that is, what happens when young people with disabilities move on from high school to the real world. PIE states are working to ensure that these youth are not simply leaving schools and going into segregated employment services. Instead, the goal is that they are engaged in competitive work for a prevailing wage in their communities.
The DirectCourse Route: College of Employment Services

Employment professionals across the country will need a higher level of professional development in order to ensure positive outcomes for transitioning youth and other citizens with disabilities. One option to support such professionals is DirectCourse, a large suite of online curricula that examines a variety of different support needs for individuals with intellectual, developmental, mental health, and physical disabilities.

The College of Employment Services (CES) is one of four online colleges that now comprise the DirectCourse curriculum. It is a partnership between the ICI, the University of Minnesota, and Elsevier. ICI is responsible for developing content for CES and ensuring that it represents best practices in the field; the University of Minnesota provides filmmaking support, and Elsevier’s learning management system provides the mechanism for course access.

The CES coursework was launched in 2012 and is developed in conjunction with College of Direct Support (CDS), which was designed to address the needs of people with developmental and intellectual disabilities. CDS trains direct support professionals to acquire a higher standard of professional achievement, thus improving their job satisfaction and the services they provide to their clients.

CDS is being used today in 35 states, with about seven million courses completed by its learners via the online learning management system. Building off of this success, DirectCourse began to expand its suite of online curricula to include coursework dedicated to improving employment opportunities across the United States.

The College of Employment Services is the direct result of this expansion. The CES mission is to educate employment professionals to assist people with disabilities in finding rewarding jobs in their communities. By taking CES courses, employment specialists are better able to help the people they support to find and maintain worthwhile employment in an integrated setting. As with CDS, CES also inspires professionals to reach higher levels of achievement and to meet or exceed national standards for their field.
Above all, the College of Employment Services is about employment and the value it brings to individuals. As expectations of and national standards for employment personnel increase, a new set of required skills is emerging. This has been illustrated by new sets of formalized standards for the field. Life is better for individuals with disabilities when the people who provide these critical supports in community settings are given the proper tools.

The Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE), a national nonprofit, recently created a new set of competencies and standards for employment professionals, along with a certifying exam. The competencies from APSE certification were used as DirectCourse’s standard when developing the CES curriculum. CES authors also closely examined the Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators (ACRE) certification process to ensure that CES courses will dovetail with ACRE’s requirements.

The CES curriculum is written in plain language, avoids jargon, and explains specialized terminology clearly and simply. The curriculum also includes a glossary that allows learners to look up unfamiliar terms and build their professional vocabulary.

Like all DirectCourse curricula, the College of Employment Services is guided by a national advisory board and a national board of editors. The national advisory board is responsible for setting the overall priorities for CES, including alignment with the APSE and ACRE standards and other best practices in the employment field. The national board of editors ensures that CES course content showcases these best practices and is consistent with the latest changes happening in the field today.
Training Made Accessible

The CES online curriculum is available to staff 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every week of the year. This means that if an employment organization has a new person starting next week, and the next in-house training isn’t available for three months, that individual can receive training their first week on the job using CES courses.

The Elsevier Performance Manager is a course management platform that brings these learning opportunities to employment organizations in the most efficient manner possible. The performance manager handles assessments, pre-tests, and post-tests, and tracks results. State agency supervisors can easily assign specific courses to their staff based on individual training needs and can monitor their progress.

Funding for employment organizations is moving to performance measures and desired outcomes; well-trained and skilled workers are critical to reaching these outcomes. The Elsevier Performance Manager allows organizations of any size to track their staff’s training, making it easy for them to provide evidence of professional development results to their funders.

Conclusion: Integrated Employment as a National Goal

The Partnerships in Employment initiative is merely one step toward reaching an ambitious, though achievable, goal: ensuring that youth and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities find meaningful employment on a national scale. Great steps have already been taken to improve employment opportunities, and the Institute for Community Inclusion is continuing to examine the best methods for helping states’ policy and practice objectives come to fruition.

Training, such as that offered by the Direct-Course/College of Employment Services, is one essential tool in helping the employment specialist who works on the front lines of the movement toward meaningful community inclusion.