Career Assessment Practices for High School Students with Disabilities and Perceived Value Reported by Transition Personnel

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When making the transition from high school to employment, students with disabilities are often less successful than peers without disabilities (Rusch, 2008). Historically, students with disabilities are more likely to experience higher rates of unemployment and underemployment (Ochs & Roessler, 2004) and are less likely to complete postsecondary education (Blackorby & Wagoner, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In accounting for these outcomes, a host of reasons have been reported throughout the literature. These include ineffective interventions that provided limited opportunities to explore careers to promote job related self-knowledge (Enright, Conyers, & Szynanski, 1996), lack of awareness regarding how career efficacy beliefs impact career development outcomes (Ochs & Roessler, 2004), lack of early career exploration experiences (Cumow, 1989 in Beveridge, Heller Craddock, Liesner, Stapleton, & Hershenson, 2002), societal attitudes and beliefs regarding career potential (Millington, & Reed, 1997), undressed familial and cultural expectations (Mpofu & Wilson, 2004), poor understanding among students on how self-determination impacts empowerment and successful outcomes (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Stang, 2008; Trainor, 2008), worksite accommodation and employment barriers (Enright et al., 1996; Millington, & Reed, 1997), lack of funding to support state vocational rehabilitation services (Lamb, 2007), lack of participation and cooperation among professionals who develop and implement the transition plan (Grigal, Test, Beattie, & Wood, 1997 as cited in Mpofu & Wilson, 2004), and an unclear understanding of professional competencies needed to successfully transition youth to employment, work and related life roles (Kamens, Dolymini, & Dinardo, 2003). These obstacles impact how high school students with disabilities identify, address, and negotiate the transition from school to post-secondary endeavors. In order to facilitate employment opportunities, career assessment becomes an important tool in helping students develop effective career decision-making skills and achieve occupational aspirations (Cummins, Maddux, & Casey, 2000; Luzzo, Hitchings, Retish, & Shoemaker, 1999).

A statewide survey of nearly 400 high school personnel and state vocational rehabilitation counselors was conducted to examine career service practices of high school youth with disabilities. Using an on-line survey, results indicated that career assessments use multiple methods that primarily focus on career interests, aptitudes and achievement as opposed to work values and knowledge of work. Although most respondents believe that services have positive impact on career development in helping students to identify and realize career potential, it appears that implementation of career services occur later rather than earlier in high school. It also appears that perceived levels of collaboration among team members, understanding of career service needs and usefulness for high school students with disabilities vary as a function of the individual transition member. Qualitative data analysis identified several themes to improve career services and transition outcomes.

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Available research to ascertain which assessment strategies are
used and their effectiveness indicates that career assessment practices vary across high schools and when used, they tend to rely more heavily on interest inventories (Neubert, 2003) rather than less commonly used approaches such as situational assessments and commercial work sample systems (Gilbride, 2006). The problem with using one assessment method in isolation is that it creates an incomplete picture of career needs of students with disabilities and hinders the effectiveness of potential career interventions (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2009).

Recently, a movement toward a more comprehensive assessment approach to identify student strengths and weaknesses has been advocated to improve career assessment practices and outcomes for students with disabilities (King, Baldwin, Currie, & Evans, 2006). For example, systemic approaches that actively involve the student with a disability as well as address needed accommodations are critical when identifying appropriate academic courses, vocational training opportunities, community services, and post-secondary opportunities (Neubert, 2003). Comprehensive career assessment models may also focus on skill instruction, self-awareness, emotional support, community knowledge, direct experience, and community interventions more so than traditional assessments (King et al.) and should also address skills related to academics, daily living, and personal and social areas (Levinson & Palmer, 2005). For these reasons, vocational assessment models for students with disabilities should be trans-disciplinary to include both school- and community-based professionals in planning, collecting, and implementing career assessment data (Levinson, 1994).

Collaboration of Transition Team Members

Implementing career plans requires collaboration among high school administrators, educators and human service providers in conjunction with students with disabilities and their families (Farney, Hassat, & Destefano, 1997) and, in fact, mandates involvement from relevant parties as described in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-446). For example, as it pertains to the state vocational rehabilitation program, counselors are required to participate in transition planning (Fabian & MacDonald-Wilson, 2005). This requirement, as Edmondson and Cain (2002) noted earlier was intentionally designed so that a natural linkage between schools and state vocational rehabilitation programs occurred. Working collaboratively, both professional groups “are well prepared to provide a continuum of services” (p.12). Unfortunately, transition team members do not always have this understanding of each other’s role in providing a smooth continuum of services and, as a result, service efficiency and effectiveness are reduced (Scarborough & Gilbride, 2006).

Professional Competence in Career Assessment

As students with disabilities and relevant family members share in the responsibility for career planning (as specified by IDEIA, 2004), it is often incumbent that the transition team meet to select, plan, process, and, when necessary, re-evaluate career information that is used in the planning process. In practice, various professionals including high school guidance counselors, special education teachers, transition counselors, and vocational rehabilitation counselors may perform this role. Professional competence in career assessment, development and intervention as well as disability knowledge (medical, psychosocial, and vocational aspects), community resources, and understanding of relevant legislation, to name a few, varies as a function of one’s unique training and experience. Within rehabilitation counseling practice, there has been a consistent body of literature indicating that career counseling is a fundamental job task (e.g., Emener & Rubin, 1980; Jaques, 1959; Leahy, Chan, & Saunders, 2003; Leahy, Szymanski, & Linkowski, 1993; Leahy, Shapson & Wright, 1987). Traditionally, rehabilitation counselors have knowledge and skill related to career development and work adjustment, vocational rehabilitation planning, occupational and labor market information, job-seeking skills development, job analysis, development, modification and placement strategies, supported employment, and post-employment services (Leahy, Muenzen, Saunders, & Strauser, 2009). Although mandated to participate in the development of the individualized educational plan, in reality, rehabilitation counselors have not always understood the unique competencies and services that other transition team members such as school counselors can provide (Scarborough & Gilbride, 2006). Other professionals who have greater involvement may not necessarily perceive competence as it pertains to career assessment, development, and realization. For example, Milsom (2002) found in a nationwide random sample of 100 school counselors that participants felt “somewhat prepared” to assist students with disabilities in planning for transitions to careers or to post-secondary institutions. Milsom believed that this limited preparedness was attributable to the few number of graduate courses related to disability information and lack of field experiences that included students with disabilities. A subsequent investigation by Milsom and Akos (2003) found that although greater numbers of school counselor education programs incorporate disability content and training in their curricula, only two of every five programs provide related coursework while one in four programs provide practical experience related to working with persons with disabilities. Although these earlier efforts lend some documentation regarding perceived levels of competence when providing transition services, there have been few studies that have specifically examined career services provided to students with disabilities (Scarborough & Gilbride, 2006). Another limitation of this earlier work is that information regarding career assessment practices has been primarily directed toward one professional group — high school counselors. Outside of the initial work by Milsom, there has been limited research in documenting the views of transition personnel who provide or influence career assessment practices for high school youth with disabilities.

Given the selective literature review cited in this paper, the following research questions were identified:

1. What career assessment methods and components are used with high school students with disabilities? When are career services typically provided and who is responsible for providing them?
2. What are perceived levels of understanding regarding career service needs for high school students with disabilities among transition professionals?
3. How do transition professionals view the level of usefulness of assessment practices?
that students derive from receiving career services and how do these services impact students’ ability to identify and realize their career potential?

4. What are perceived levels of collaboration regarding career service delivery and how is this collaboration viewed among transition professionals?

5. How do transition professionals view the level of helpfulness that students with disabilities derive from receiving career services?

Because of the potential impact that each of these professional groups has on career service delivery, we were interested in examining the perceptions of these individuals. In our earlier literature (e.g., Milsom, 2002; Scarborough & Gilbride, 2006), we identified three professional groups that are involved in providing career services to high school students with disabilities: (a) transition professionals who facilitate career services; (b) the person responsible for providing career counseling services to students with disabilities; and (c) other professionals who provide career services, and (d) level of helpfulness they believe that students with disabilities derive from receiving career services. Although not a primary research question, in trying to understand more fully, we were also interested in examining relationships between respondents’ perceptions of perceived usefulness of career services, impact on helping students identify and realize their career potential, level of collaboration among transition professionals, and years of experience providing career counseling services to high school youth with disabilities.

Method

An on-line questionnaire developed for this study contained questions regarding respondent demographic variables (job title, highest educational degree and concentration area), career assessment practices (e.g., grade level when assessments are conducted, responsible for providing career counseling services to students with disabilities), type of services available (e.g., on-line career assessment, on-the-job tryout or training, work sample systems) and career areas assessed (e.g., achievement, aptitude, interest). In addition, survey questions also asked respondents to comment on their: (a) understanding of career service needs of high school youth with disabilities; (b) impact of career services on helping students identify and realize their career potential; (c) degree of collaboration among professionals who provide career services, and (d) level of helpfulness they believe that students with disabilities derive from receiving career services. Although not a primary research question, in trying to understand more fully, we were also interested in examining relationships between respondents’ perceptions of perceived usefulness of career services, impact on helping students identify and realize their career potential, level of collaboration among transition professionals, and years of experience providing career counseling services to high school youth with disabilities.

Results

Participants

An initial statewide sample of 433 respondents consisting of state vocational rehabilitation counselors (n=117), special education teachers (n=76), transition counselors (n=66), high school counselors (n=51), high school teachers (n=47), high school administrators (n=32) and others (n=46) who did not identify their job title participated in the on-line questionnaire. Of the initial sample who started the survey, 396 persons completed the entire survey. Unless noted otherwise, reported percentages are based on the sample who answered all questions on survey.

In terms of school setting, respondents indicated that the high school where they worked or provided consultation services was located in rural (38.2%), suburban (26.3%), urban (12.9%) or combined (rural/suburban) school settings (23.3%). The sample consisted of more females (72.2%) than males (27.8%) and was predominantly White (96%) with 2% Black and 2% who did not indicate racial affiliation. With regard to years of professional experience, the sample averaged 10 years (S.D = 9.17). The average age of participants was 45 years old (n=389). Educationally, they were more likely to have master’s degree (68.7%) than a baccalaureate (24.7%), doctoral (4%) or associate degree (2.5%). In terms of academic training, there was a fairly large dispersion of academic majors within the sample with the largest categories including degrees in special education (11.7%), rehabilitation counseling (10.5%), teacher education (6.9%), education (3.5%), psychology (3.5%), and secondary counseling (2.5%). Remaining disciplines included those from anthropology, business, child development, counseling, criminal justice, curriculum and instruction, education administration, educational leadership, English, guidance and counseling, history, human services, law, marketing, mathematics, professional leadership, public administration, reading, school counseling, social work, and technology.

Career Assessment Practices

Data related to the first research question concerning career assessment practices included list-serve participation and the use of standards and guidelines for high school students with disabilities. A cover letter explaining the study with a URL address in order to complete the survey was forwarded to eligible participants from the first list-serve. A second list-serve including high school principals received a similar cover letter but, in this case, they were also asked to forward information about the survey to professionals within their respective high schools who participated in transition team meetings. Because the investigators did not specifically ask how many professionals within each high school received the announcement, it was not possible to calculate an exact participation rate.

With the exception of the first research question that required descriptive analysis, the remaining questions used Chi-square analysis to examine perceptual differences across six professional groups (high school administrators, high school counselors, special education teachers, transition counselors, and state vocational rehabilitation counselors). These data were analyzed using Pearson correlation coefficients. Finally, a qualitative analysis was done to identify content themes to an open-ended question that invited respondents to make “additional comments regarding career services for students with disabilities.”
assessments indicate that of the eight career assessment methods identified, multiple methods rather than any single one are used. Job shadowing, computer-assisted career guidance systems, job seeking skills training, on-the-job trials, individual work samples, and on-line career assessments are the primary career assessment tools. Besides minimal use of commercial work sample systems to assess work traits and temperament, a list of other infrequently resources cited under “other” category were included job coaching, career fairs, career study programs (consisting of four weeks at the end of the senior year), field trips to local businesses, colleges and technical schools, paid internships with local employers, and work-study programs.

Of the seven career assessment areas evaluated, vocational interest was the dominant assessment area, followed by aptitude and achievement testing (see Table 1). Other testing areas that were used in about one of every three high schools included career decision-making skills, work values, personality and knowledge about the world of work. Further, these assessments generally occur throughout high school (76.9%) at about the same frequency with perhaps a somewhat greater occurrence at the 11th grade (38.1%) in comparison to the 9th (30.5%), 10th (23.3%), and 12th (24.5%) grades. Still, a small percentage of respondents (8.3%) indicated that career assessments are not conducted at any grade level. When they are conducted, career assessments are most likely the responsibility of either the transition counselor/coordinator (53.5%) or the high school counselor (51.5%).

Understanding of career service needs. The second research question regarding perceived levels of each respondent group’s understanding about career service needs of high school students with disabilities indicate that the majority of respondents perceive that as a result of their professional training and experience they have either a “moderately clear” (39%) or “very clear” (46%) understanding of career service needs while a minority reported “limited” (14%) or “little or no” (1%) understanding. When examining level of understanding across the six professional groups, there was statistically significant difference in observed and expected frequencies ($X^2 (15, N = 387) = 114.58, p = .0001$). Specifically, with the exception of state vocational rehabilitation counselors, all of the other professional groups had higher than expected frequencies with regard to “moderate” levels of understanding career service needs as a result of their professional training and work experience. There were also greater numbers of special education teachers, transition counselors, and state vocational rehabilitation counselors who expressed “minimal” understanding of student career service needs than hypothesized. With regard to the other reported levels of understanding (i.e., “little or no” and “very clear”), these levels were generally within expected frequencies; the notable exception was that fewer special education teachers and state vocational rehabilitation counselors expressed “very clear” understanding of career service needs.

Usefulness of career services. The third research question that examined the level of usefulness derived from career services found the majority of respondents (63%) believed that these services were “somewhat” useful while 28% perceived “very useful” and 9% “not useful.” When examining the degree of usefulness as a function of job title, Chi square analysis revealed a statistically significant difference among the six groups ($X^2 (10, N = 379) = 23.49, p = .009$). Although most professional groups were in the expected frequency estimate across levels of usefulness, there was higher percentage of state vocational rehabilitation counselors who believed that these services were “very useful.” Within the “not useful” category, as a group, vocational rehabilitation counselors (12%) and transition counselors (13%) had higher than expected percentages than other groups. In terms of overall rating of career services, more than any other professional group, high school administrators (50%) expressed the most favorable rating of career service being “very useful.” In contrast, vocational rehabilitation counselors (19%) had the lowest percentage among professional groups who expressed that career services were “very useful.”

With regard to the impact of career services on helping students identify and realize their career potential, results indicate that respondents believe that these services have a “moderate” (50.3%) or “significant” (21.4%) impact. Still, there is a sizable minority who express that career services as implemented in their respective high schools have either “minimal” (23.2%) or “little or no” (5.2%) impact. When examining how impact perceptions are viewed across professional groups, Chi-square analysis revealed differences among the groups, $X^2 (15, N = 384) = 43.74, p = .0001$. Data indicate that both transition counselors and state vocational rehabilitation counselors are more likely to report that career services have either “little or no” or “minimal” impact than other professional groups. In contrast, school administrators and special education teachers tended to perceive higher levels of

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<td>Percentage of High Schools that Address Specified Career Assessment Areas</td>
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Note: $N = 433$
“significant” impact on helping students identify and realize their career potential.

Level of collaboration. The fourth research question addressed perceived levels of collaboration between students with disabilities, their families and school officials and related consultants (administrators, counselors, teachers, rehabilitation counselors) who facilitate career services. Nearly half (48.4%) of respondents (n=397) perceived that “moderate” collaboration exists whereas a sizable minority expressed that either “minimal” (29.5%) or “little or no” (14.5%) collaboration occurs in their school. In examining perceptual differences in collaboration across the six professional groups, Chi Square analysis found a statistical difference across job titles, $\chi^2(15, N = 386) = 29.78, p = .01$ . Specifically, there were slightly higher percentages of high school administrators and high school teachers who perceived that “minimal” levels of collaboration than hypothesized. Of the six professional groups, only vocational rehabilitation counselors and transition counselors/ coordinators, perceived more frequent reports of “moderate” and “significant” levels of collaboration than hypothesized.

Overall helpfulness. The final research question asked respondents to evaluate how they believe students with disabilities perceive career services, in terms of overall helpfulness. Over two-thirds of transition professionals believe that students find services “helpful.” About one-fifth perceive that students experience career services as being “neither helpful or unhelpful.” In examining perceptual differences across professional groups, Chi Square analysis found a statistical difference across job titles, $\chi^2(15, N = 386) = 40.92, p = .001$ . Although most patterns between expected and observed frequencies were generally consistent, it appeared that state vocational rehabilitation counselors, transition counselors/ coordinators and high school teachers more than other three professional groups believe that students who use career services find them “helpful.”

Post-hoc Analyses

In order to understand relationships among participant responses concerning perceived usefulness of career services and their impact on helping students identify and realize their career potential, level of collaboration among transition professionals, perceived helpfulness that students derive from career services, and years of work experience providing career counseling services, Pearson correlations were conducted. It should be noted that a distinction between “usefulness” of career services and “helpfulness” was noted in the analysis. In the former instance, we were asking respondents regarding their overall perception of how useful career services are for students; in the later instance, we were ascertaining how they believed students were helped by these services. Results indicate that statistically significant relationship, jobs and moderate effect sizes were found across several variables (see Table 2). The variables with moderately large correlations (i.e., those with .5 or higher) were associated between (a) perceived usefulness of career services and impact on helping students identify and realize their career potential understanding $r=.65 (p<.0001)$, (b) beliefs regarding how helpful students perceive career services and impact on helping them identify and realize their career potential $r=.64 (p<.0001)$, (c) beliefs regarding how helpful students perceive career services and the level of collaboration among transition professionals, students, and family members $r=.53 (p<.0001)$ and (d) level of collaboration among transition professionals, students, and family members and impact on helping them identify and realize their career potential $r=.59 (p<.0001)$. Essentially, these correlations indicate that if transition personnel believe that students found career services useful then there was increased likelihood that professionals believed that career services impacted on helping high school youth with disabilities to identify and realize their career potential. In addition, if there is a perception that collaboration exists within the transition team then there is a stronger likelihood that these professionals believe that students benefit from participating in career services. Finally, as might be expected, there was a small but statistically significant relationship between years of professional training and work experience and perceived understanding of career service needs of high school youth with disabilities $r=.37 (p<.0001)$.

Qualitative Analysis

Approximately one in four participants provided responses to the open-ended question that allowed respondents opportunity for further comments. In determining whether shared comments represented a new theme, the investigators established criteria that at least 10% of respondents had to describe content in their narratives. Given this criterion, four themes were identified: teamwork, training needs, parental involvement, and unrealistic career goals.

Teamwork. The largest number of comments (n=26) was associated with the importance of working as a team and how it contributes to higher rates of success in helping students achieve employment goals. Part of the success of maintaining effective teamwork was attributed to leadership. For some respondents, they felt that the appointment of a transition services coordinator was necessary; noting that this lead person is perhaps the only professional who maintains relationship with students, family members, school personnel and vocational rehabilitation counselors. It was also clear from several narratives that state vocational rehabilitation counselors and high school counselors do not fully understand their respective roles and responsibilities as they pertain to transition services and, for this reason, how it negatively impacts professional relationships.

Training needs. Of the 19 respondents who provided comments on training concerns, one commonality between school counselors and vocational rehabilitation counselors was that neither group believed they received sufficient training as it pertained to school to work transition issues or how to work collaboratively to improve transition outcomes. Among vocational rehabilitation counselors, it was reported that there has not been any training funding for the past several years and, as such, several respondents expressed a lack of knowledge when providing services to high school youth with disabilities. An interesting aspect to this perceived training deficit is that within Pennsylvania there is a week-long conference held annually on transition of youth with disabilities. Unfortunately, because of budgetary constraints over
the past years, few OVR counselors are able to attend the transition conference.

**Parental involvement.** Eighteen respondents specifically noted the importance of parental involvement and how participation in transition meetings is often associated with positive outcomes. Anecdotal comments by several individuals reported that there is a sizable percentage of parents (with varying estimates between 25% and 40%) who do not participate in transition planning and, from this viewpoint, this problem largely explains why plans fail. As it pertains to parental involvement, several transition personnel respondents believe that parents have unrealistic expectations regarding services available to promote employment or post-secondary outcomes.

**Unrealistic career goals.** Ten participants believed that helping professionals do not address unrealistic career goals. One teacher indicated that, “Most students today have a post-secondary outcome expectation but have third grade reading and math levels. Students have no clear understanding of college expectations.” Several isolated comments place this responsibility on the high school guidance counselor in order to identify and work toward realistic career goals.

**Isolated identified comments.** Other identified comments expressed by several respondents included perceptions that: (a) career assessment services in rural schools were less comprehensive than what may be available in urban or suburban school districts, (b) level of funding allocated to student services and personnel needed to implement and monitor transition services was insufficient (c) career services should be introduced earlier in the school curriculum and, if possible, in the middle school, and (d) obstacles that interfere with career realization (limited public transportation, no driver’s license and/or money to purchase a car and insurance, insufficient number of employers willing to volunteer as career mentors).

**Discussion**

In general, it appears that students are receiving career assessment services throughout their high school experience and, in fact, about half are receiving them by the 10th grade. For students receiving them in the first two years of high school, career assessment and related outcomes have a stronger chance for success as it allows students greater opportunities for career exploration. For the minority of students (less than 10%) who do not receive any career assessment services, it may be that these students, family members or IEP members perceive no need or do not have adequate resources to provide services. Failure to provide career services as part of a transition plan constitutes non-compliance with federal legislation. Unfortunately, as evident in noted several reports (National Council on Disability, 2000; Rusch, Hughes, Agran, Martin, & Johnson, in press), the majority of states are in non-compliance with transition services.

It also appears that professional groups most responsible for providing career counseling are either high school counselors or transition counselors/coordinators. In the case of school counselors, Pennsylvania’s Career Education and Work Standards Toolkit (Pennsylvania Department Education [PDE], 2009) contains a comprehensive set of standards required of all students in the state, including career assessment and preparation for careers. The Standards, however, were being implemented in schools while data were being collected for our study, and many school counselors may not have implemented the Standards. PDE, through the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network provides ongoing training for school counselors, special education personnel, and rehabilitation counselors across the state but it is not known what percentage of these personnel participate in training. Based on our survey results, as it applies to high school counselors, transition consultants and state vocational rehabilitation counselors, further training on relevant disability legislation particularly as it applies to IDEA (2004) is needed. This need is particularly important if transition personnel want to increase the percentage of high school students receiving career services ear-

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<th>Table 2: Correlations of Perceptions Regarding Career Services and Select Demographic Variables</th>
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**Correlation significant at .01 level (2-tailed)**

*Correlation significant at .05 level (2-tailed)
lier rather than later in high school. Given that students who reach age 16 are most likely in the 10th grade when the initial IEP is in effect, as part of IDEA, evaluation results that address “academic, developmental, and functional needs of the child” have to be identified. For this reason alone, initiating career assessment services earlier in high school is needed because it is part of the developmental process that starts in childhood (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2009). As noted previously, high school students with disabilities have limited opportunities to explore and refine career decisions (Enwright et al., 1996) and, as a result, may have a lack of awareness about how career efficacy beliefs impact career development outcomes (Ochs & Ressler, 2004).

It is clear that career assessments within the high school use an array of assessment tools beyond traditional paper-and-pencil tests. School and affiliated personnel are providing community-based experiences such as job shadowing and on-the-job training as well as computer-assisted career guidance systems and individual on-line assessments. They are also incorporating career portfolio and assisting students with job seeking skills. Data indicate that of the eight career assessment methods identified, multiple methods rather than any single one are used. Job shadowing, computer-assisted career guidance systems, job seeking skills training, on-the-job tryouts, individual paper-and-pencil career tests and/or on-line career assessments are the primary career assessment tools. Besides minimal use of commercial work sample systems to assess worker traits and temperaments, a list of other infrequently resources cited under “other” category included job coaching, career fairs, career study programs (consisting of four weeks at the end of the senior year), field site visits to local businesses, colleges and technical schools, paid internships with local employers, and work-study programs were used.

Of all the available assessment tools, however, commercial work sample systems are ones that are used very infrequently which support earlier observations by Guidubaldi et al. (1989). Perhaps cost considerations involved with work samples, training needed to use them as well as a desire to place students in actual work settings rather than simulated work activities account for their limited use. In addition, given that job shadowing and on-the-job training allow evaluators to understand not only worker characteristics but also address environmental aspects that provide valuable career information to students, these methods also provide evaluators information about job modifications and related modifications.

On the basis of self-report indicators, both school-based (administrators, counselors, teachers) and allied professionals (state vocational rehabilitation counselors and transition counselors) perceive that career services provided to high school youth with disabilities are useful. In particular, high school administrators had the highest percentage (50%) among professional groups who reported that these services were “very useful.” In contrast, high school teachers and vocational rehabilitation counselors seemed most critical as to the usefulness of career services provided. Although not a primary research question, post-hoc analysis revealed that participant perceptions regarding usefulness of career services and impact on helping students identify and realize their career potential was statistically significant and moderately correlated with one another. In addition, having a collaborative relationship among transition professionals, students, and family members seems related to perceived usefulness that career services may hold in identifying career goals and career identity. This collaboration, as noted time and time again in the literature (e.g., Edmondson & Cain, 2002; Furry et al., 1997; Grigal et al., 1997; Kamens, Dolyiuik, & Dinandito, 2003; Milsom, 2002) is critical when developing and implementing transition plans. Collaboration, though, is something that takes time and requires a clear consensus of professional roles and responsibilities among members, engagement and open communication, and effective leadership within the group to successfully resolve conflicts. In short, it requires a working atmosphere where members respect, understand and value one another. Because of this prevailing problem of not understanding and effectively tapping into strengths and competencies that all persons who participate in the transition team, service efficiency and effectiveness are reduced (Scarborough & Gilbride, 2006). It seems somewhat paradoxical that while only 17% of vocational rehabilitation personnel attend these transition meetings (Grigal et al. in Mpofo, & Wilson, 2004), in Pennsylvania, 35% of all VR customers served were youth and young adults age 25 or younger (Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, 2007). Perhaps greater participation by VR counselors will result in stronger collaboration and ultimately positively impact a significant number of clientele whom they serve.

Although this study indicates that, overall, transition professionals perceive that career services help students identify and realize their career potential, about one in four perceive that they have either “minimal” of “little or no” impact. This perception is more likely held by transition counselors and state vocational rehabilitation counselors as opposed to school administrators and special education teachers. Perhaps this situation occurs because transition and rehabilitation counselors are more likely to work directly with students in achieving career goals. As found in this study as well as earlier work by Neubert (2003), evaluation of career interests represents a fundamental assessment area. Although this domain is assessed more than any other area (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2006; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2009) vocational interests among teenagers are not stable. Consequently, making vocational plans based, in part, on this domain, may have biased professionals who are more likely to work directly with students in realizing employment goals. As noted in this study, while assessment areas concerning knowledge about the world of work and career decision-making skills are addressed, in comparison to other career assessment areas such as achievement, aptitude, and personality, they do not receive the same attention. Given documented problems that high school youth with disabilities have about the world of work and career decision-making (e.g., Cummings et al., 2000), it would seem that greater attention in these areas on the part of high school guidance counselors and vocational rehabilitation counselors is warranted.

Limitations and Conclusion

Inherent with most survey research designs and certainly applicable to this study as well concerns issues of respondent bias,
sample size, and perceptual consistency with actual practice. It is possible that survey participants have different views than nonrespondents and therefore findings do not reflect the broader population of professionals who contribute to career services to high school youth with disabilities. In addition, self-report data expressed in the survey may not, in fact, reflect actual transition practices within this particular state or in other states. Furthermore, there was no attempt to ascertain student or relevant family member perceptions regarding career service practices and perceived usefulness. Consequently, career service usefulness and impact on career development may not be as positive as that expressed by various professional groups who are either directly or indirectly involved with service provision. Finally, given the potential number of various professionals who provide career services in high schools and those who were informed about the survey and responded, another limitation concerns sample representation of transition personnel.

With these limitations in mind, survey results suggest that vocational rehabilitation counselors can play a more prominent role in transition planning of high school youth with disabilities. Specifically, it seems that earlier intervention by rehabilitation counselors when students reach age 16 may have important benefits in career assessment, planning and ultimately successful transition. Because rehabilitation counselors are in a unique position to advocate for students, provide or procure a variety of career assessment services and share information regarding post-secondary and employment opportunities, they have the potential to make a positive impact on reversing negative outcomes that often result with youth with disabilities.

References


