

BUILDING, DEVELOPING, AND GOING TO SCALE:
GRANT FUNDED PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH IN TRANSITION

A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TOOL FOR NAVIGATING THE ROAD TO WORK

MODULE 1

COLLABORATION & RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Paul DiLorenzo, ACSW, MLSP
with assistance from
Veronica Hemrich, Esq.

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National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth

“The significant problems that we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when they were created.”

– Albert Einstein

MODULE 1:

Collaboration and Relationship Building

1. Introduction	Page 1
2. Collaboration and Relationship Building.....	Page 3
3. References	Page 5

The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) is composed of partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, and workforce development issues. NCWD/Youth is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC. The Collaborative is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems to integrate youth with disabilities into their service strategies.

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Information on the Collaborative can be found at

<http://www.ncwd-youth.info/>.

Information about the Office of Disability Employment Policy can be found at

<http://www.dol.gov/odep/>.

INTRODUCTION

The Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (DOL/ODEP) has embarked on an ambitious youth-focused research initiative. Its primary purpose is to improve outcomes for youth with disabilities who are transitioning into workplace settings. Currently, the outcomes are poor, and have been so for some time.

The ODEP youth initiative presents states and local communities with an opportunity to reverse this trend for youth with disabilities. These grants, combined with ODEP’s funded technical assistance, can help non-profit public and private entities build a system of care for transitioning youth.

The rationale for this initiative is well justified. The outcomes for youth with disabilities continue to be unsatisfactory, in almost all areas. There is little likelihood that they will find meaningful employment as they begin the transition process. More disturbing, the lack of an organized system of support continues to hamper their chances of success. Numerous studies report problems addressing the transition needs of youth with disabilities through interagency collaboration and cooperation. Indeed, all ODEP grantees are no doubt aware that the following problems exist in many state and local systems:

- Lack of shared student information across agencies
- Lack of follow-up data on program recipients that could be used to improve efficiency and effectiveness
- Deficient interagency agreements
- Difficulty in predicting needed post-secondary services
- Minimized role for parents and student in decision-making
- Inefficient and ineffective management practices

Grantees should also understand that their participation in these initiatives are coming at a time when both government and philanthropic organizations are focusing their attention on the broader arena of “transition.” Although each of the

ODEP’s Mission

The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) provides national leadership by developing and influencing disability-related employment policy as well as practice affecting the employment of people with disabilities.

Its vision is a world in which people with disabilities have unlimited employment opportunities.

ODEP serves as a catalyst for change through:

- Developing evidence-based employment solutions
- Delivering authoritative and credible data on employment of people with disabilities
- Guiding economic and social policy
- Building collaborative networks

ODEP youth projects have different emphases, they all share one thing in common: the charge to organize their work around evidence-based system neutral guiding principles and guideposts that help youth-serving institutions improve the transition process. For many youth at risk, entry into the new economy is nearly impossible. This includes young people leaving foster care, youth who are returning from juvenile justice facilities, and those who have chronic mental health concerns. There is an acknowledgement, based on credible evidence, that the discreet systems for these populations working in isolation are simply not effective. Further, the overlap between these high risk populations and youth with disabilities is considerable. In that sense, the grantees who are participating in the ODEP initiative are part of a much larger national process examining how the challenges for youth in transition can become opportunities. That implies that as a field of practice, the grantees, in collaboration with their state partners, can move towards a more comprehensive understanding of service delivery approaches, policy changes, funding strategies and desired outcomes.

The reality is that no one organization ever “owns” the transition responsibility. Multiple agencies are responsible for parts of the transition process. Success requires building cross-agency partnerships – based upon the guideposts – to affect multiple delivery systems.

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Like most well-intended reform initiatives, ODEP's youth initiative has created a high level of excitement, especially among veteran service providers. The initial reports from the grantees regarding their progress are very positive. Though it is still too early to identify any specific effective practices, there are undoubtedly several promising approaches. Although one common element of these approaches is that they are mostly centered on direct services, the key point is that agencies, intermediaries, and workforce development systems will need to craft new collaborative arrangements that include representation by human services, employers, business, education, vocational rehabilitation and young people. Again, this becomes especially relevant in light of a broader, national level of attention.

Grantees, currently or in the near future, will be approaching the critical stage of determining how to take their work to scale, how to build strategic collaborative relationships, how to blend and braid resources, and how to sustain their work past the grant

period. This document is being prepared as a technical assistance tool for grantees and their sub-grantees. It is part of an overall strategy to support the work of grantees entering these critical stages.

These modules reflect a combination of established practices from human systems and educational reform, successful business models, and responses to insightful questions raised by ODEP's grantees. Even though their original purpose was to support the efforts of the ODEP's grantees, the information contained in the modules have utility for anyone involved in workforce development system, state agencies working with youth in transition, policy makers and any public or private funders interested in innovative, collaborative youth development efforts. The modules are not meant to provide a step-by-step approach, nor should they imply any linear process. Instead they offer a straightforward overview of the complex and deliberate interactions and coordination needed to effectively fulfill our collective responsibility to improve the well-being of youth with disabilities.

ODEP's Guideposts for Effective Youth Services

In addition to the involvement of a caring and supportive family with high expectations for the youth and an education environment that enables the youth to reach his or her learning potential research shows that all youth including those with disabilities, need the following in order to transition from school to young adulthood successfully.

ODEP has integrated the following four guideposts into its youth-related policy initiatives:

1. Preparatory experiences which include career interest and vocational assessments, information about careers including education and entry requirements, income potential and work-readiness skills including computer skills.
2. Connecting activities, which involve collaborating with other institutions (e.g. sponsoring schools, postsecondary institutions, local workforce development organizations) to provide necessary support services for youth and to enrich program content. This includes insuring academic tutoring is provided if necessary; providing exposure to supportive peer and adult mentors; and helping youth explore self-sufficiency issues like assistive technology, transportation, benefits planning, and health maintenance.
3. Work-based experiences which include site visits, job shadowing, internships, entrepreneurial ventures, and/or actual paid employment activities building up to on-the-job experiences. Such experiences are an essential component to promoting informed job choices.
4. Youth leadership and development which include providing structured relationships with adults in both informal/formal and individual/group mentoring situations, and exposing every youth to personal leadership skills such as self-advocacy and self-determination, as well as activities that build self-esteem, interpersonal skills, and teaming.

COLLABORATION AND RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

Within the human services, the preferred type of relationship is a collaborative one where there is an agreement on common goals, the use of resources, the activities needed to accomplish the goals, and an agreed upon assignment of tasks among the partners. A key element of these collaborative relationships is the steady flow of information in both directions. However, such relationships do not develop overnight. They develop within the context of respect, trust, and thrive when the partners support each other's core competencies. Relationships require a sustained and intentional effort, including everything from frequent conversations and clarifications to more formal agreements such as Memorandums of Understanding.

Collaboration is sometimes thought of as the "soft" task of building, developing and taking an initiative to scale. However, there are elements of measurability related to the collaborative process. The quality of collaboration among initiative partners is another challenge and opportunity for the grantees.

Building and maintaining relationships is the foundation for effective collaboration. There is no way to over-emphasize the integral role of relationships in the overall set of system building tasks. These relationships are not limited to grantees and providers. Instead, there is a need to develop quality relationships among recipients of the services, non-traditional partners that are sometimes ignored, and employers. If there were one practical way to measure successful relationship building at a site it would be this: ODEP grantees will become known as a primary resource for

youth within the community. The partners and the community, especially youth, will know where to turn and know that the resource "door" will always be open.

Many human service reform ventures go awry because of the poor quality of the relationships, the protection of "turf," and the intense competition of ego-driven personalities among the service providers and policy makers. The quality of the relationships in these situations can be so poor that even the slightest obstacle can be a paralyzing event. Without an underpinning of trust and cooperation, *system-building* projects rarely progress beyond their initial development phase.

The unfortunate reality is that the participants often fail to recognize that these relationships can simultaneously benefit the youth in transition, as well as the self-interest of the participating organizations. More importantly, the presence of these quality relationships can help the participants to navigate the endless grey areas of their transactions and ultimately sustain the guiding principles of an initiative.

An over-emphasis on collaboration can sometimes cause an initiative's partners to lose sight of their purpose, in this case improving ODEP-identified transition outcomes for youth. Collaboration is a process, a tool -- a means to an end, which should assist partners and stakeholders in their efforts on behalf of youth with disabilities.

RELATIONSHIPS QUICK TIP # 1 The Foundation of Sustainability

The foundational work of relationships is critical because it prepares the group to move an agenda, when the timing is right. For example, in some collaborative relationships, the partners wait for grant opportunities or a Request for Proposals to be issued, and then begin to seek out common interests

and a mutually agreed upon vision. This is generally too late, or at a minimum it will not give the partners the reflective period they need to craft a sustainable project. The crafting of these relationships is an ongoing effort, which should always be prospective and always preparatory. Within the context of this

future orientation, every partner has a shared leadership role to take the others to the next task -- to take the others wherever the work is going. Completing a grant proposal, or designing a new program approach should be a logical conclusion to this work, not the beginning stage of the collaborative relationships.

Characteristics of a successful collaboration include:

- Agreeing among the partners on a mission and a common set of goals
- Agreeing on the activities needed to accomplish the common goals
- Clarity about the roles and responsibilities for accomplishing those goals
- Agreeing on the use of resources, financial and otherwise, to accomplish those goals
- Monitoring progress of common goals
- Establishing mutual relationships delineated by memorandums of understanding that exemplify the shaping of a vision, agreement on shared outcomes and the ability to commit dollars and staff to the implementation of transition outcomes
- Incorporating multiple funding sources that cut across traditionally separate services and programs

The Together We Can Initiative's Six Common Stages of Collaborative Change

1. Getting together
2. Building trust and ownership
3. Strategic planning
4. Taking action or implementation
5. Deepening and broadening the work
6. Going to scale

- Maintaining the steady flow of information in both directions

Collaboration is in evidence when initiative partners are serving youth who are simultaneously connected to multiple service systems. It is also evident when policy makers and program managers are coordinating their resources. The partners should also keep in mind that the primary purpose of the collaborative activities is to improve the outcomes for those young people and their families. The *Together We Can Initiative*, developed several years ago by the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL),

identified six common stages of collaborative change. In practice, these stages are not linear, but spiral back and forth throughout an initiative's life, as necessary to fulfill the collaborative partners' shared vision.

Use the checklist below to assess the strength of your collaboration and to work towards improving it.

Checklist to Assess Strength of Collaboration

Question	YES	NO	Next step
• Is there a shared vision among the partners?			
• Is there shared agreement on the indicators of success?			
• Is there a clear communication strategy for sharing the common vision among all of the partners including youth and their parents?			
• Is there a process for shared decision-making and conflict resolution?			
• Are there clear assignments, roles, and responsibilities?			
• Is there an individual or an intermediary whose role it is to attend to the collaborative process tasks?			
• Are there adequate, flexible resources to assist the collaborative in creating new approaches or modifying current approaches to serving transitioning youth?			
• Are the youth and /or their families part of the collaborative?			

The advantage of building quality relationships can be seen in the practical application of project development and effectiveness. The ODEP grant projects require participants to improve the outcomes for youth in transition and to build a sustainable process for reaching out to young people. The cultivation of robust relationships (process) provides the partners with the tools they need to meet ODEP's goals (product). And, the inter-agency collaborations that in turn result from these relationships can promote new opportunities, coordination, and growth, especially in those programs, which are more, isolated geographically.

Collaborative relationships can achieve this "robustness" by applying six basic practices:

1. Developing innovative approaches
2. Identifying current weaknesses in the system of care for youth in transition
3. Improving the efficiency and the overall application of resources
4. Preparing for the inevitable uncertainty of the future
5. Providing a mechanism for conflict resolution
6. Maintaining and growing the application of effective practices

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RELATIONSHIPS QUICK TIP # 2 Communities of Practice

As the quality of relationships improves and grantees are able to take them to the next levels, they can develop into what Etienne Wenger calls "communities of practice." Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and who regularly interact to learn how to do it better. These communities are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain endeavor.

The three crucial characteristics of these communities of practice are:

1. The domain
2. The community
3. The practice

The combination of these three elements makes a community of practice which, ultimately, leads the participants to a process for problem solving, requesting information of each other, and seeking experience from others who have dealt with a

challenging situation, reusing assets and coordination and synergy of resources. Wenger has laid out how, through the building of communities of practice, collaborative partners can improve the outcomes for youth with disabilities. The communities of practice model is also well-understood by the for-profit businesses who call on their internal experts (their employees) to constantly innovate and improve their bottom line performance.

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