EXPLORING BARRIERS AND STRATEGIES FOR FACILITATING WORK EXPERIENCE OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES ENROLLED IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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There are a multitude of benefits associated with employment, which many individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) are not afforded due to their struggles to find and maintain work. These poor employment outcomes are in part being addressed by the over 240 post-secondary education (PSE) programs for students with ID that exist on college and university campuses in the U.S., many of which include work experience as a program component. A sequential mixed methods study, featuring a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews, was conducted to explore challenges faced by PSE program directors when facilitating work experience engagements, as well as strategies utilized to encourage employers to provide work experience opportunities for students. In addition, the study included a component designed to explore the existence of potential relationships between certain PSE program characteristics and barriers faced when facilitating paid work experiences. Findings include the identification of common barriers to facilitating paid work experience for students in PSE programs as being: (a) transportation issues, (b) employer perceptions of the abilities of people with disabilities, (c) inadequate number of staff hours to support students in the workplace, and (d) finding time in the student’s schedule. To increase paid work experience opportunities for students, PSE staff commonly use the following strategies: (a) solicit feedback from employer regarding the placement, (b) build a trusting relationship with the employer, (c) match student interests with their work experience position, (d) negotiate the scope of the job with employers so that it benefits both the business and student, (e) provide direct on-site training for the students in the workplace, (f) utilize natural supports in the workplace, and (g) provide students with an opportunity to relate what is learned in the workplace to what is learned in the instructional curriculum. The findings suggest that none of the program characteristics included in this study have a significant impact of the types of barriers faced by PSE staff when facilitating paid work experience. A discussion about these findings, including implications and recommendations for future research, has also been provided.