



Vocational Rehabilitation and Community College Customized Training Partnerships: Practices and Challenges

By Katie Allen, Neil McNeil, and Kartik Trivedi

The Job-Driven Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center (JD-VRTAC) aims to identify, adapt, embed, and sustain job-driven practices in vocational rehabilitation (VR) that lead to improved employment outcomes for people with disabilities. The JD-VRTAC collaborates in the research and training efforts of the Vocational Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Demand-Side Strategies (Demand-Side RRTC). The Demand-Side RRTC aims to improve the VR system's capacity to respond to employers' needs. The JD-VRTAC and Demand-Side RRTC jointly formed a Community of Practice (CoP) focused on how vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies can collaborate with community colleges and businesses to access and develop training opportunities for people with disabilities to obtain and retain jobs.

Background

This Community of Practice (CoP)¹ formed to understand the ongoing and burgeoning partnerships between state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies and community colleges. The CoP discussion focused on community college, VR, and business partnerships that have emerged from the field to address gaps in access to training opportunities for people with disabilities. VR has traditionally partnered with community colleges and businesses to fit their clients into existing job training programs and college courses.

VR has evolved as a dynamic partner in developing and implementing customized training programs with community colleges and businesses that actively engage job-seekers with disabilities. Partnerships with community colleges, businesses, and training providers help prepare VR clients for competitive employment in high-demand industries.

Customized training programs address the skills gaps for job-seekers who are interested in acquiring skills of a specific industry or trade, and that meet the hiring needs of specific businesses or industries

The JD-VRTAC team conducted a survey of technical assistance needs from VR agencies regarding business engagement and supports, customized training, and labor market information. From this assessment, they learned that state VR agencies

want guidance around implementing [Registered Apprenticeships](#), developing new certificate programs, and creating formal or informal partnerships with community colleges.

Most of the agencies that responded to the survey also stated their willingness to commit resources to the customized training technical assistance process. These factors indicate a heightened awareness among VR agencies of the emerging needs within the VR system to more effectively manage partnerships with businesses and community colleges.

Recent relevant federal legislation, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), contains new specified uses for VR funds for business engagement. These include creating opportunities for work-based learning and training workers with disabilities. By partnering with community colleges and business, VR agencies can comply with this element of the new law.

This ReviewVR brief highlights practices from agencies that participated in this CoP. These practice examples focus on how VR and community college partnerships were established and maintained, and how VR and community colleges engage businesses in the development and implementation of customized training programs.

VR and Community College Partnerships on Customized Training Initiatives

VR and community colleges have the opportunity to pursue a common goal of helping people in their communities achieve sustainable, living-wage employment. Could VR and community colleges mutually benefit from establishing partnerships to create **middle-skills customized training programs** for people with disabilities in their communities?

Middle-skills jobs are jobs that require more education and training than a high-school diploma, but less than a 4-year college degree (*ExploreVR Customized Training Toolkit, Uses*). Middle-skills jobs



usually provide better prospects for professional growth compared to lower-skills jobs. Lower-skills jobs are mostly entry-level and temporary, and offer limited prospects for professional growth. Middle-skills jobs may require better collaboration between education and employers and industry-specific training (Fuller, 2016).

Customized training programs for middle-skills jobs address the skills gaps for job seekers who are interested in acquiring skills of a specific industry or trade, and who meet the hiring needs of specific businesses or industries.

Middle-skills customized training programs are thus designed to prepare VR consumers for secure employment with a higher skillset and career pathway in businesses and industries that have positions ready to be filled (*Biden Report, 2014; Customized Training Toolkit, Overview*).

To learn more about Customized Training, visit the [ExploreVR Job-Driven Customized Training Toolkit](#).

Community of Practice Process

Thirteen staff from five VR agencies (Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation VR Program, Delaware Division of VR, Nebraska VR, Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services, and South Carolina VR Department) and three community college partners (Colville Tribal College, Southeast Community College in Nebraska, and Community College of Baltimore County in Maryland) joined the CoP. Participating VR agency staff represented various levels in their agencies, and shared responsibility for developing relationships with business and colleges.

Community college staff included program directors who developed courses and training programs and engage employers to hire graduates. The CoP met via teleconference eight times over the course of 10 months, with flexible topical agendas co-led and set by the VR and community college staff at the end of each previous call.²

The CoP focused on how to identify strategies for VR agencies to develop partnerships with community colleges and businesses to create customized training programs that lead to competitive, integrated employment for people with disabilities. The CoP discussed components of customized training programs in each state, how to engage counselors in business relations activities, how to measure the effectiveness of VR/community college trainings programs, and the future of VR/community college partnerships.

Call	Facilitator	Topics
1	ICI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why states chose to participate in this CoP What states want to contribute and learn from colleagues
2	Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How VR and community colleges determine business needs VR/community college coordinated business relations strategies/efforts
3	South Carolina VR Department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examples of collaborative community college/VR customized training programs How to market training programs
4	Community College of Baltimore County	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internship programs How to manage resistance when engaging business Future of VR/CC customized training programs
5	Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How to engage VRCs in business relations The culture change for VR around engaging business What community colleges are offering that adapt to the VR culture change How WIOA impacts community colleges
6	South Carolina VR Department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How VR can successfully track and obtain quality data from community college partners to show the effectiveness of trainings How states use sector strategies and training aligned to meet the needs of business
7	Nebraska VR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nebraska VR's methods for creating and facilitating trainings for VR consumers with community colleges and employers
8	ICI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wrap-Up and feedback

How are VR and Community College Partnerships Initiated?

VR and community colleges partner to create customized training programs in response to the needs of business and VR consumers. VR refers to these training programs as “dual customer strategies” that serve the needs of both job-seekers who want to develop skills in specific industries and employers who want to hire skilled workers.

Businesses can be a critical piece of this partnership.

VR and community college staff report that businesses and industries drive the demand for specific skills trainings that fit their hiring needs. In some cases, VR initiates these partnerships because they are aware of the business interests. Community colleges and businesses may also drive the development of customized training programs and partnerships.

VR-Community College Partnerships

Case Example: VR-Initiated Training Partnership

Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services and the Community College of Baltimore County Single Step Program

[Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services](#) (DORS) operates a [Workforce Technology Center \(WTC\)](#). This WTC is one of eight original state-operated Comprehensive Rehabilitation Centers in the U.S.

The WTC has re-invented itself by fully engaging community business partners and a community college system to create both “in-house” and business-based job-driven customized training programs. Instructors from the Community College of Baltimore County Single Step Program provide individualized instruction to Maryland DORS consumers at the WTC. This partnership has helped the [Community College of Baltimore County Single Step Program](#) reach students from across the state outside of Baltimore County.

Maryland DORS traditionally offered basic skills training courses through the WTC, but by partnering with the community college, VR has expanded training programs to include Warehousing Technician, Childcare Provider, Professional Animal Care Worker, Security Guard, and more. The community college is able to implement more diversified, flexible, short-term, certification-based programs that award credentials to VR consumers in the community.

Students can benefit from wrap-around and support services that VR provides at the WTC simultaneously with their on-the-job training experiences with business partners.

In addition to partnering with community colleges, many VR agencies are looking for ways to increase their presence in public high schools. High schools can be key partners in developing and implementing training programs with VR and community colleges for students who are transitioning from high school to the workforce.

In Delaware, VR collaborated with Delaware Technical and Community College to develop

a supported education program for recent high school graduates transitioning from high school to a two-year community college program. Delaware VR meets regularly at the statewide level with the Department of Education to discuss how to expand this strategic partnership with schools.



Case Example: Supported Education Training Partnership

Delaware Division of VR, DelTech Community College, and local high schools

Delaware Division of VR and [Delaware Technical and Community College \(DelTech\)](#) created a [supported education program](#) to help high school graduates with disabilities transition from high school to college.

Delaware VR provides counseling support to students and funding for DelTech tutors and pre-college level course instructors. DelTech instructors customize the supported education curriculum depending on students’ needs in each class.

VR Transition Assistants and VR College Counselors work as liaisons to VR high school transition counselors and the community college to help acclimate students to college-related challenges. In response to a need for additional non-academic support, DelTech has incorporated life skills workshops into supported education courses about social media, independent living, budgeting, and how to talk to instructors about disability.

This year, Delaware VR is working with DelTech and the Delaware Department of Education to integrate these workshops into high school curricula as well. This supported education program helps prepare students entering college for college credit coursework and career pathway certification programs that DelTech offers.

Community Colleges may also initiate customized training partnerships. Community colleges have received grants to initiate partnerships with local employers. One such grant program is the [Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training \(TAACCCT\)](#) grant program through the U.S. Department of Labor and Department of Education. TAACCCT helps community colleges finance the creation and improvement of customized training programs in collaboration with local business. Community colleges can involve VR in these partnerships by enrolling students from VR in these training programs.

Case Example: Community College-Initiated Training Partnership

South Carolina VR Department and the South Carolina Technical College System

In South Carolina, the [South Carolina Technical College System](#) initiated a partnership with VR. The technical college received a grant from the state to create the [South Carolina Manufacturing Certification Program \(SCMC\)](#), a state-wide initiative.

Many businesses were interested in hiring students from this program, but the technical college did not have the students to fill the training capacity. The college needed a pipeline to employers, so a community college staff reached out to VR for consumers to fill the training spots.

Today, VR is part of this statewide technical college-employer partnership. The former college staff is now employed as the Transition Specialist and technical college statewide liaison in the Business Services Unit at [South Carolina VR](#).

Engaging Business in VR-Community College Training Partnerships

HOW DO VR AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES ENGAGE BUSINESS TOGETHER?

VR and community colleges can partner to engage business together. Establishing a business relationship is often the first step in a customized training business partnership.

VR and community colleges engage business using a variety of methods, including:

- » **Establishing business advisory boards for specific industries** to learn about business needs
- » **Meeting one-on-one at the business with employers** to explain VR and community college services and training programs
- » **Attending Chamber of Commerce meetings** and workforce development board meetings
- » **Inviting employers and community colleges to present to VR consumers** about job and training opportunities
- » **Partnering with other workforce agencies** to promote a common marketing message to employers

Colville Tribal College in Washington surveys area businesses about the kinds of positions they are looking to fill. [The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation VR Program](#) conducts environmental scans of new businesses coming to the area to determine what types of training programs to develop.



Case Example: VR-Community College Training Partnership to Engage Business

The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation VR Program & Colville Tribal College

An employer was building a new hotel and casino in the local area. VR and the tribal college partnered to develop and implement a 10-week certification training curriculum on hotel hospitality. Consumers were trained on transferrable hospitality skills, preparing them for various job positions in the hotel.

Eighty VR consumers graduated with a hotel hospitality certificate, soft skills, and food handling skills. The hotel hired all VR consumers who participated in the certification program, as well as consumers from other workforce agencies.

Currently, the VR program and tribal college are working with the casino's human resources department to develop a curriculum on management training. Next, Colville's VR program and tribal college will be developing natural resource restoration and office support programs with local businesses.

Hear from Business: One employer in Maryland shares their experience with Maryland DORS:

The Professional Animal Workers (PAWS) Program is a 10-week program developed by the VR agency in partnership with the Community College of Baltimore County. Following the training, participants partner with a business like the Axiom Pet Resort shown here for On-the-Job Training.

Training and Placement: Integrating Work Experience and Training

VR engages with employers and community colleges to develop training programs to more effectively meet the needs of the labor market. These trainings are often developed in response to a business or industry need or assessed through existing business contacts. Trainings are also developed using labor market information (LMI), including employment trends that are expected to continue or learning of a new business moving to the local area in a particular industry sector.

VR and community college partnerships may follow a model of creating a training program with input from the employers who can benefit from hiring the program graduates. Often these training programs are modeled on existing training programs within community colleges for students interested in specific trades. Correspondingly, VR coordinates the development of the training program, ensuring that consumers get maximum training

returns and possible employment opportunities. VR and community college personnel then work to develop relationships with employers in the industries that will benefit most from hiring their students and consumers.



There are numerous benefits to establishing relationships with employers *before* approaching them with training or job placement needs. Even if a business or industry sector is not hiring, VR and community colleges establish relationships with employers to make them aware of their talent pool and training initiatives.

Nebraska VR uses existing business contacts to provide a hands-on, or “on-the-job” training component to their consumers. There is an expectation that the employer will hire the consumer or provide a reference to other employers if the consumer is a good fit.

In this model, the community college will often provide a corresponding classroom training component. A community college certification might also provide wider acceptance of VR consumers’ credentials and experience across the state.

Case Example: Classroom and On-the-Job Training Partnership

Nebraska VR and Southeast Community College

[Nebraska VR](#) and [Southeast Community College](#) partnered to develop an Auto Technician Certificate Training program at the community college.

This 10-week summer training program was divided into two 5-week sessions. Students spent the first session in classroom training four days a week, and job shadowing on Fridays. During the second 5-week session, students spent three days in classroom training and two days job shadowing each week.

Part of the classroom was designed as an Auto Tech shop, so students could get hands-on auto tech training in the classroom with instructors and on the job with employers.

Business-led Training Partnerships

Some training programs benefit from community college involvement, whereas others are entirely employer-driven. Employers may choose to host trainings that fully immerse consumers in the work environment.

Some benefits of employer-based trainings include:

- » **Curriculum flexibility.** Because businesses do not offer college credit, the curriculum can be designed to reflect the businesses’ specific needs rather than classroom competencies.
- » **Time.** Employers can schedule the training during times that are convenient and provide the best opportunity for students to learn on the job.
- » **Hands-on experience.** Employer-based training programs require no classroom time, which provides more time for hands-on work experiences.



Case Example: Business-Initiated Training Partnership

Nebraska VR and Donner Steel Works

In 2014, Nebraska VR partnered with [Donner Steel Works](#) to develop a Welding Certificate Training program. In this model, VR Evaluators assess consumers who are interested in welding careers.

The business partner (Donner Steel Works) leads the curriculum design and training program implementation. VR funds the training time and materials, as well as the job training wages for consumers.

Typically, between 70-80% of consumers are hired by the training business or related businesses at the end of this program. Donner Steel Works contacted VR to develop this training for VR consumers.

For more information about developing business relationships, visit the [Business Engagement Toolkit](#).

Training Activities

Depending on the state and partnership structure, VR and community colleges provide training courses to students and consumers using a variety and combination of methods and formats. In some states, training programs enroll VR consumers exclusively, while others are open to clients from workforce partners as well. Some states focus on partnering with businesses to create on-the-job training programs and internship opportunities for consumers. Follow the links below to learn more about models and services from states in this community of practice.

- » [The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation Vocational Rehabilitation \(VR\) & Colville Tribal College](#)
- » [Delaware Division of VR](#)
- » [Nebraska VR & Southeast Community College:](#) This video showcases Nebraska VR Counselors, consumers, employment specialists, instructors, and employers perspectives on Nebraska VR's certificate training programs.
- » [Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services & Community College of Baltimore County:](#) This video recounts the history of the Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) Customized Training Model and the partnership between the community college and the Workforce Technology Center (WTC).
- » [South Carolina VR Department](#)

Maintaining Training Partnerships

HOW ARE VR AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE PARTNERSHIPS SUSTAINED?

Once customized training programs are established in partnership with VR, community colleges, and business, how can these programs be maintained? By establishing common goals, VR and community colleges can be natural partners in customized training development and implementation, but how can VR and CC's continue to keep businesses engaged? VR and community college staff maintain business relationships through successful customized training partnerships.

Case Example: Business Advisory Boards

Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services and Community College of Baltimore County Single Step Program

Maryland DORS and the Community College of Baltimore County Single Step Program offer skills training programs jointly through the Workforce Technology Center that include on-the-job training elements in partnership with business. One example is the Auto Detailing Program ([link to video](#)).

The VR Employment Department and the community college instructor created a business advisory board with representatives from the automotive business community. This advisory board provided feedback on the auto detailing training program, information about their hiring needs, and information about the skills and competencies they are looking for in employees.

Employers report that they like to hire candidates who show up on time for their shifts, work well as part of a team, and pay attention to detail.

Case Example: Training Contracts with Business

South Carolina VR Department

In South Carolina, VR Business Development Specialists (BDS) engage with employers broadly to develop relationships, market VR to business, and learn about business needs. BDS also negotiate training contacts to establish a pipeline from VR consumers, to community college training students, to employees.

South Carolina VR has an integrated business services team, their Employer Engagement Team, which includes personnel from VR, community colleges, and other workforce programs. The Employer Engagement Team coordinates outreach to businesses and examines local labor market information to inform training development for VR clients. This team talks to businesses to learn what training they want for future employees before they are hired.

Case Example: Supporting Business by Supporting Students and Employees

Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services and Community College of Baltimore County Single Step Program

The VR Employment Department and the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) Single Step Program facilitate the internship portion of the VR/CCBC customized training partnership. VR Employment Department staff and CCBC instructors collaborate with existing business partners to place students in internships with employers. The VR Employment Department staff provides ongoing supervision to students at the internships sites. Job coaches and CCBC instructors may also provide support to students.

As the point of contact for the business, the VR Employment Department staff the CCBC instructor visit the internship sites of their students on a regular basis to learn more about employers, take other students on tours of the site, and gain a sense of which students to place at the sites. When a VR consumer student is hired by the internship site as a formal employee, VR Employment Department staff continues to visit the employment site to assess an employee's progress and provide support to the student and employer.

By working together, VR and community colleges can engage with business to develop training programs for people with disabilities that provide a pathway to competitive, integrated employment.

VR also offers consultation and services to employers at no cost, such as ADA accessibility assessments, trainings, and information about reasonable accommodations in the workplace. To learn more about VR services to business, visit the JD-VRTAC [Employer Supports Toolkit](#).

Sources

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Endnotes

- ¹ A Community of Practice is a group of people who meet regularly to share concerns and passions, and advance knowledge about a particular topic (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002). In their book, *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge* (2002), Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder identify several principles that make up the CoP model, including creating open dialogue from different perspectives, inviting various levels to participate, and focusing on value. VR agencies often report that they participate in CoPs and other learning communities to learn about other states' policies, trainings, and practices. Using CoP principles, VR, community college, and ICI staff from various levels in their agencies collaborated over a ten-month period to define the topic, share ideas and practices, and develop new strategies for a VR/community college partnership approach.
- ² JD-VRTAC and Demand-Side RRTC project staff formed a CoP workgroup to identify 8-15 potential participants for the CoP. The CoP workgroup invited staff from state and tribal VR agencies who work directly with community colleges, as well as staff from community colleges to join this CoP. The CoP workgroup identified VR agencies that either had experience working in partnership with community colleges on demand-side customized training initiatives, or that had plans within the next year to initiate this kind of program.

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Explore VR

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