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# Assessing Fidelity of the Career Pathways Advancement Project Core Model Components

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## Introduction

Beginning in 2015, ICI/UMass Boston has been the independent evaluator of the Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Career Pathways Advancement Project (CPAP). Nebraska VR first piloted the CPAP model as one of four state VR agency grantees funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) to carry out a 5-year Career Pathways for Individuals with Disabilities demonstration project. Building on the success of the CPAP 1.0, in 2021, Nebraska VR was awarded a second model demonstration grant funded by the RSA to build on and expand the CPAP model (known as "CPAP 2.0") for an additional five years. Learn more about the CPAP 2.0 project and ICI's 4-pronged approach to evaluation, including (1) Process Evaluation, (2) Fidelity Assessment, (3) Outcome Evaluation, and (4) Progress Reporting. In this brief, we will focus on the second prong: the Fidelity Assessment, and provide an overview of the fidelity tool and its criteria.

## Fidelity Assessment

The fidelity assessment method determines how Nebraska VR's implementation strategies align with CPAP 2.0's Upskill/Backfill model. Together with the process evaluation, these methods describe the context in which the model was implemented. Several members of the ICI Evaluation Team travel to the CPAP 2.0 site each year, meet with the staff, conduct group conversations, and observe the process to understand the project's alignment with the fidelity instrument. There are three parts of the fidelity assessment:

1. **Defining the core elements of program.** This part of the fidelity assessment defines and refines elements of the program to explore major changes, discontinuation, or any major development. This part also explores each element of the program compared to business as usual.
2. **Measurement.** This part of the fidelity assessment explores how we measure and assess each element of the program and explores the best sources of data to do so.
3. **Sustainability/Replicability/Transferability.** This part of the fidelity assessment evaluates the sustainability of each element of the program and explores the resources that might support its continuation.

The ICI Evaluation Team uses a detailed fidelity tool divided into four major categories: (1) Project Design, (2) Project Services, (3) Project Management, and (4) Project Evaluation. Each of these criteria are further broken down into elements that help the evaluators determine how closely the project is following the model's fidelity components.

# Nebraska VR's Career Pathways Advancement Project (CPAP): Fidelity Tool Core Model Components

The CPAP model components are organized into four areas:

1. **Project Design:** Project is designed to foster collaboration and engage targeted populations, regions, and industries
2. **Project Services:** Services meet the advancement needs of clients and businesses
3. **Project Management:** Program demonstrates capacity to deliver services and sustain itself
4. **Project Evaluation:** Data tracking and analysis focus on impact on targeted outcomes

## 1. Project Design

**The project design outlines how the initiative is structured to support participants as they move through career pathways toward career advancement. It is defined by three interconnected components.**

### Partnerships and Collaboration

**First, partnerships and collaboration are intended to enhance how the project works with other federally funded career pathways initiatives to align services, share resources, and strengthen participant support.** The CPAP 2.0 project design includes internal alignment of state entities, such as the Nebraska Department of Education and the Nebraska Career and Technical Education model, as well as collaboration with other public agencies outside of Nebraska, such as other state VR agencies implementing career pathways model demonstration grants.

### Target Population and Outreach Strategies

**Second, the target population and outreach strategies determine who the project aims to serve and how individuals enter the program through multiple entry points and referral pipelines.**

CPAP 2.0 uses a comprehensive recruitment strategy that includes conducting outreach to past Nebraska VR participants who had successfully closed into employment and a dedicated strategy for businesses to refer incumbent workers with disabilities to pursue career advancement. CPAP 2.0 is a statewide program, reflecting general service volume in rural and urban area offices. Business outreach is also statewide, reflecting general business account management practices.

### Target Industry Sectors and Workforce Needs

**Third, the program targets industry sectors and workforce needs by preparing participants for high-quality employment opportunities in Nebraska's high-demand, high-growth industries.**

Labor statistics provided by Nebraska DOL indicated high-growth and high-demand in targeted occupational clusters for the program, including increasing access to training opportunities and advancement in pathways of:

- Administrative Support
- Construction
- Healthcare Science Support and Therapeutic Services
- Lodging
- Manufacturing
- Professional Sales
- Restaurant & Food Beverage Service
- Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics (TDL)

## 2. Project Services

**Project services outlines how the model has supported both participants and employers, which is called a dual-customer approach. These services are organized around three main components.**

### Upskill/Backfill Approach

**First, the project uses an Upskill/Backfill approach to career development, which incorporates six key components of career pathways to help participants build skills, advance in their careers, and create openings for others to enter the workforce.**

The program is based on the criteria that secondary and postsecondary education align with identified local workforce needs and the skill needs of targeted industry sectors that are important to local, regional, or state economies. Additionally, the program targets rigorous, sequential, connected, and efficient curricula that connect education and skills training courses and that integrate education with training, as appropriate. As participants upskill and advance, therefore vacating their former positions, this creates a backfill opportunity for current VR clients to potentially obtain those entry-level jobs.

VR services are comprehensive, coordinated, and personalized support services that are designed to ensure the individual's success in completing education and training programs. Comprehensive support services include:

- financial literacy, benefits counseling, childcare, health and mental health, and transportation
- educational supports (e.g., tutors and on-campus supports, such as writing labs, math labs, and disability services)
- self-advocacy training (e.g., mentoring, peer relationships, understanding how to request services and supports)
- assistive technology services and devices

Flexible design of education and training programs and services to meet the particular needs of VR participants include flexible work schedules, alternative class times and locations, and the innovative use of technology, including assistive technology.

Education and training programs that focus on advancing in employment and are designed to develop the following knowledge and skills include:

- career development counseling and guidance, including self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management;
- career and technical skills leading to advancement in careers, including the skilled trades and STEM careers
- soft skills (e.g., understanding, communication, teamwork, networking, problem solving, critical thinking and professionalism, learning styles, identifying strengths and weaknesses)

### Accessing and Creating Pathways for Advancement

**Second, the project focuses on accessing and creating pathways for advancement, ensuring that participants have clear, structured routes to move into higher-level positions within their industries.**

CPAP staff use the NDE Career and Technical Education career pathways model. The CPAP team includes a dedicated training development specialist [KH4] role that develops demand-driven, short-term credentials assisting in meeting the immediate needs of the businesses by working with community colleges, adult education, and the Department of Labor to identify and develop training/credentialing. The specialist also works with businesses and public partners to increase pre-apprentice and registered apprenticeships in Nebraska to increase training opportunities for job seekers and incumbent workers.

### Dual-Customer Approach

**Third, the initiative applies a dual-customer approach engaging directly with businesses to understand the needs and providing employer supports that align workforce development efforts with industry demand.**

The CPAP 2.0 team includes business pathways specialists who conduct outreach to businesses and provide technical assistance or other resources (e.g., trainings) for employers as needed on topics or strategies related to career advancement for VR eligible individuals with disabilities. The business pathways specialists introduce the Upskill/Backfill model and offer the assistance of the training development specialist in developing training/credentialing programs and facilitating the need for credentialing. Business contacts, including formal or informal, are tracked in the Nebraska VR Employer Electronic Database for current business engagement information. CPAP 2.0 also integrates the existing Progressive Employment model approach to worksite experiences and assessments, including job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships, and other paid and unpaid work experiences that are designed to lead to career advancement for individuals with disabilities.

## 3. Project Management

**Project management describes how the initiative is organized, supported, and sustained to ensure effective implementation. It is guided by three core components.**

### Staff Capacity and Leadership Support

**First, staff capacity and leadership support outlines the skills, experience, and training of the project team, ensuring that staff is equipped to deliver services, manage partnerships, and support participants effectively. Leadership support in turn, highlights the role of the project's leaders in guiding the initiative, providing oversight, setting priorities, and ensuring that the project stays aligned with its goals.**

Adequate staffing is needed to support all activities in addition to adequate funding to fully implement the program. Leadership establishes coordination between relevant units/departments that have resources needed to support CPAP 2.0 implementation.

Leadership works with partners to ensure effective outreach and adequate enrollment and retention of participants and subsequently acts on policy/procedural challenges and facilitators of implementation.

### Sustainability

**Second, sustainability focuses on the project's ability to maintain its operation over time, including studying the project for replicability, strengthening processes, and building partnerships that allow services to continue beyond the initial timeline.**

The model demonstration provides an opportunity for the Nebraska VR program to pilot the model prior to full integration into the VR program. During this period, the team assesses how the model components could be implemented in the VR program context (outside of the grant), including funding considerations, policy implications, and other operational considerations such as staffing, client communication, or other program functions.

## 4. Project Evaluation

Project evaluation focuses on how the initiative measures its effectiveness and documents progress toward its goals. It is grounded in two main components.

### Data Collection

**First, data collection involves gathering accurate and consistent information on participants, services, partnerships, and implementation activities. This includes tracking enrollment, participation, employment outcomes, and other key indicators that reflect how the project is functioning.**

CPAP 2.0 activities are captured in the appropriate data systems in a timely and accurate manner. Targeted performance measures are articulate and collected, and clients, businesses, and other partners indicate satisfaction with program services.

### Impact on Targeted Outcomes

**Second, we measure the impact on targeted outcomes to determine whether the project is achieving the results it aims for, such as improved access to career pathways, increased skill development, and advancement into high-demand industries.**

Program outcomes include measuring the average hourly wage and average hours worked per week for individuals receiving services. Additional performance measures include whether individuals receive employer-provided medical benefits, and whether individuals report personal wages as the primary source of support vs. public benefits (e.g., SSI, SSDI, and/or TANF, and state or local benefits) as their primary source of support.

# Conclusion

Taken together, the fidelity assessment criteria provide a comprehensive picture of how the project is designed, delivered, managed, and evaluated. This process enables the ICI Evaluation Team to provide timely feedback that supports the overall quality and continuous improvement of the project. This fidelity tool can help to chart a course for Nebraska VR to sustain the model following the grant period. It can also inform potential replication of the model outside of Nebraska VR for other agencies seeking to expand career advancement services to VR clients and incumbent workers with disabilities while meeting the needs of businesses.

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**VISIT:** Nebraska VR's CPAP website to learn more about this effort.

**ACCESS:** ICI's Career Pathways Toolkit

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