

# Longitudinal outcomes of Project SEARCH in upstate New York

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## Abstract.

**BACKGROUND:** Project SEARCH is a successful job readiness program for high school students with disabilities, ages 18–21, and is recognized for its innovative approach and collaborative efforts between business, education and vocational rehabilitative services. Project SEARCH employment outcomes far exceed the national average rate of employment for people with disabilities, with a 68% success rate in transitioning students from high school into competitive employment. However, little is known about the long term employment outcomes for the young people who have completed the training program.

**OBJECTIVE:** This study, that includes longitudinal data collected from three Project SEARCH sites in Upstate New York that have an impressive 83% success rate overall, provides the first longitudinal analysis of the impact of Project SEARCH.

**CONCLUSION:** Data collected as part of this 5-year evaluation project indicate promising trends; and support the notion that the Project SEARCH model is successfully preparing young students with disabilities with the skills necessary to both obtain and retain employment in integrated work settings. While these findings are promising, further research is needed to substantiate the reported outcomes.

Keywords: Employment, post school outcomes, program evaluation, transition, developmental disabilities, Project SEARCH

## 1. Background and purpose

Over the past 25 years, despite a concerted effort to provide access to quality work readiness training for people with disabilities, and a simultaneous increase in awareness of the value of diversity in the workforce, the employment gap for this population has remained consistently high. The percentage of youth and young adults with disabilities employed has been steadily trending down over much of the past decade (Butterworth, Migliore, Sulewski, & Zalewska, 2014). Furthermore, the lack of employment opportunities for

people with disabilities is directly linked to high rates of poverty as evidenced in a recent report from the United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (2014) indicating that nearly 1 out of 3 Americans with disabilities are currently living in poverty.

The high school transition years for students with disabilities should be a time to focus on obtaining the necessary skills to successfully prepare for adult, post-school roles within the greater community. Yet effective transition eludes many youth, despite receiving extended special education services (Black-orby et al., 2010). The mandate of special education is to prepare youth to pursue further employment, education, and independent living beyond the school years (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004, 20 U.S.C., §1400 (33)(c)(1)). However, youth

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with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed in comparison with their typically developing peers (Carter et al., 2010; Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011).

It has been noted that participating in work experience while in high school is a predictor for positive post-school outcomes related to employment (Allen, Ciancio, & Rutkowski, 2008; Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2012; Test et al., 2009). However, methods of transitional school-to-work preparation utilized may be inadequate to prepare youth for the workforce, as these tend to be short-term in nature and do not provide necessary hands-on opportunities for learning in integrated settings (Rutkowski, Daston, Van Kuiken, & Riehle, 2006). Project SEARCH, established in 1996 at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, is a high school transition-to-work program that was designed in response to these noted inadequacies in work readiness preparation during high school transition programs, as well as to address the persistently low rates of employment nationally for young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) exiting the school system.

The Project SEARCH program is unique in that it is business led, and built upon a model of effective collaboration between business, education, adult services, and vocational rehabilitation. Participating students experience full immersion within the business through hands-on internship learning opportunities with the support of a teacher, job coach, and the natural supports of supervisors and coworkers within the business work environment. The primary objective of Project SEARCH is to prepare students to exit school into competitive, integrated employment in their communities (Daston, Riehle & Rutkowski, 2012).

While the average rate of employment for people with disabilities hovers around 30% (Butterworth, Smith, et al., 2014), Project SEARCH currently reports a success rate of moving 68% of program graduates into employment across the 300+ high school transition programs currently in operation (M. Daston, personal communication, October 2, 2014). However, little is known about the long-term outcomes of these youth. Past evaluations of various transition-to-work program models have indicated that programs with impressive initial outcomes (some as high as 70% employment), were not necessarily effective interventions in terms of long-term job retention. Employment rates consistently dropped off at 12-month and 18-month follow-up, with few individuals remaining employed at 3 to 5 years after exit from the school system (Luecking & Fabian, 2000;

Noyes & Sax, 2004). In order to better assess the full impact of the Project SEARCH model, longitudinal study is necessary to ascertain and identify key contributing factors to successful retention.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the initial and long-term employment outcomes of Project SEARCH, based on data collected as part of the evaluation of three Project SEARCH sites in Upstate New York.

## **2. Addressing a community need through implementation of Project SEARCH**

Implementation of Project SEARCH in Monroe County, NY was part of a coordinated response to a community-wide needs assessment funded by the Golisano Foundation. The final needs assessment report identified a lack of quality options for job readiness training for transition-aged, special education students (Advocacy Center, 2006). As a result, the Golisano Foundation, in collaboration with Strong Center for Developmental Disabilities (a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities) and the New York State Developmental Disabilities Planning Council, embarked on a project aimed at evaluating the feasibility and sustainability of the Project SEARCH model in New York.

Three Project SEARCH programs were developed in Monroe County, in partnership with three large businesses representing the healthcare, retail, and government sectors. A city school district and each of two Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) operating in the county serve as the education leads, allowing access for any student within the county regardless of their school district of origin. Two large supported employment providers provide the job coaching and job development services.

## **3. Participants and program description**

The sample for this study includes 124 students and young adults with IDD who participated in Project SEARCH high school transition programs in Monroe County, NY between 2009 and 2014. This sample represents five cohorts of students, one per school year during this period of time. A description of the sample is found in Table 1. The majority of participants are male (55%) and Caucasian (66%). By disability classification, the majority of participants have an intellectual disability (38%), Autism (14%), or multiple

Table 1  
Description of sample (N = 124)

|                                             | n   | %    |
|---------------------------------------------|-----|------|
| <i>Gender</i>                               |     |      |
| Male                                        | 68  | 54.8 |
| Female                                      | 56  | 45.2 |
| <i>Race</i>                                 |     |      |
| African American                            | 40  | 32.3 |
| Asian                                       | 2   | 1.6  |
| Caucasian                                   | 82  | 66.1 |
| <i>Ethnicity</i>                            |     |      |
| Hispanic                                    | 18  | 14.5 |
| <i>Disability Classification (primary)</i>  |     |      |
| Autism Spectrum                             | 17  | 13.7 |
| Blind/Visually Impaired                     | 1   | 0.8  |
| Deaf/Hearing Impairment                     | 3   | 2.4  |
| Emotional Disturbance                       | 1   | 0.8  |
| Intellectual Disability                     | 47  | 37.9 |
| Learning Disability                         | 15  | 12.1 |
| Multiple Disabilities                       | 16  | 12.9 |
| Orthopedic Impairment                       | 1   | 0.8  |
| Other Health Impairment                     | 14  | 11.3 |
| Speech or Language Impairment               | 7   | 5.6  |
| Traumatic Brain Injury                      | 2   | 1.6  |
| <i>Eligible and Receiving Services from</i> |     |      |
| Vocational Rehabilitation                   | 124 | 100  |
| Developmental Disabilities                  | 93  | 75   |

disabilities (13%). The sample reflects an overrepresentation of both African American (32%) and Hispanic (15%) participants in comparison to the population profile of Monroe County, NY (United States Census Bureau, 2014). In both cases the percentage of the sample was double that of the general population. This difference is attributed to the fact that one of the Project SEARCH programs in Monroe County specifically targets students from a large, urban district with a disproportionate representation of African American and Hispanic students.

Each cohort of students was identified through a collaborative selection process, as stipulated by the Project SEARCH model (Daston, Riehle, & Rutkowski, 2012). Each year, during the fall and early winter, the transition programs were marketed broadly throughout the community, and interested students and families were invited to submit an application to the program. The application screening process focused on confirming that students were eligible for a special education transition program for 18–21 year olds, and had the support of the home school district to participate in Project SEARCH. An interview committee made up of representatives from the host business, school, supported employment provider, vocational rehabilitation and the state developmental disabilities agency was established. This committee interviewed students in the

spring of each year and made final selection decisions. The selection process and criteria remained consistent with the national guidelines of Project SEARCH (Daston, Riehle & Rutkowski, 2012). The most important factors in the student selection process included a stated desire on the part of students and families to participate, and an agreed upon interest in pursuing competitive employment upon program completion. Student applicants were assessed for their anticipated level of support needs; and priority was given to those students who fell into the middle and lower range, as being the students most in need of the intensive training and supports provided by a Project SEARCH program. Each program could accommodate up to 12 students per year (maximum of 36 students per school year cohort), with a September start for each cohort.

Project SEARCH is a licensed model, with an established implementation plan. The process for replication involves a standardized approach to technical assistance and training to ensure model fidelity. Each of the three programs associated with this project paid strict adherence to the core components of the model, as developed by Project SEARCH at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center (Daston, Riehle, & Rutkowski, 2012), and careful attention was paid to ensure standardization in practices across sites. All three programs have successfully completed a model fidelity audit.

#### 4. Data collection and analysis

For each cohort, the primary author facilitated and monitored data collection at the start of the program in September, upon program completion in June, and at six-month intervals for up to 48 months past program exit. A data sharing agreement was reached between the evaluation team, and the education provider and supported employment provider for each program. A data-collection spreadsheet was developed in collaboration with the partner supported employment provider agencies, and in consultation with Project SEARCH at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. The intent was to ensure that the instrument was easy for providers to use, and would capture all data elements necessary to address both the project evaluation questions and the data reporting requirements for the National Project SEARCH database. The primary author maintained responsibility for distribution and collection of the data.

Each September, basic demographic information was collected from the educational provider for all

program participants. This information was entered into a database using Microsoft Excel. Individual participants were assigned a unique identifier, and coded by program location and cohort year to allow for ease in comparison during data analysis. The database was updated three times during the program year, once per internship rotation, to record instances when students exited early either due to obtaining employment or disengaging with the program.

Baseline employment outcomes were collected each June, coinciding with program completion, and entered into the database. The supported employment agency provider for each program had responsibility for submitting data utilizing the agreed upon data collection spreadsheet. Data collected at baseline included the number of hours per week the individual was working, wage/hour, receipt of employer benefits, name of employer, job title, and age of participant at hire. In addition, participants hired by the host business as a direct result of their internship during Project SEARCH were indicated.

Longitudinal outcome data were collected every six months, for up to 48 months after program completion, utilizing the same data collection spreadsheet used to collect baseline data. At the request of the supported employment providers, the spreadsheet was supplied prepopulated with the data collected at the previous, most recent data collection interval. Providers reviewed the spreadsheets, indicating any changes. This included number of hours per week worked, wage per hour, and receipt of employer benefits. Changes in employer and/or job title were also collected.

All participant data was de-identified. The school and supported employer provider agencies were provided with a standardized naming protocol to assign unique identifiers for each participant. As such, the individual identity was protected within the database. Data was originally collected as part of a program evaluation project designed to assess the feasibility and sustainability of the Project SEARCH model within New York State educational and supported employment structures. As the data was analyzed only retrospectively in regard to project outcomes, this study qualifies as exempt by the Research Subjects Review Board.

Data analysis was conducted in Microsoft Excel, and consists of descriptive results for program completion, rates of employment at baseline, and job growth and retention over time. Missing data in the data set was found only in fields related to hours working per week and wages per hour, and were limited to reporting periods beyond baseline. In these cases, the number of

hours worked and wages per hour from the previous reporting period were imput. Data were analyzed on a per program basis, as well as in aggregate. Individual program outcomes were shared with the project teams for review and discussion as part of ongoing program improvement efforts. For the purpose of this paper, only aggregate results are reported.

## **5. Program completion and baseline employment outcomes**

During the first year of implementation, only one of the three projects was in operation. The additional two projects came online with Cohort 2, resulting in more than double the enrollment for Cohorts 2–5 as compared with Cohort 1. The average program completion rate across all cohorts was 86%, and remained fairly steady from year to year. Cohort 2 saw a significant dip in program completion.

Baseline employment outcomes are established in June for each cohort, and represent the percentage of students who obtained employment as of the program graduation date. At baseline almost half (48%) of participants successfully obtained employment across all cohorts. Of these, 51% were hired by the Project SEARCH host business where the student trained. At hire, participants worked an average of 23 hours/week at \$8.65/hour. The average starting wage for a Project SEARCH graduate is approximately 8% above the minimum wage, which is currently \$8/hour in New York. Cohorts 1 and 3 saw the highest rate of employment at baseline, each over 60%. These cohorts also had the highest rate of hire by the host business. Conversely, Cohort 5 had both the lowest baseline employment outcomes (28%) and percentage of students hired by the host business (44%). Table 2 provides a detailed summary of program completion and baseline outcomes for each cohort studied.

Participants who are not hired upon graduation from Project SEARCH enter into an intensive phase of job development, in partnership with the supported employment provider attached to each program. Overall employment rates for each cohort are calculated at 6 months past program exit, allowing ample opportunity for graduates to find and obtain employment. Figure 1 illustrates the year-by-year overall employment outcomes for the three Monroe County, NY programs, in comparison to baseline employment rates achieved by graduation each June. For Cohorts 1 through 4, the average overall rate of employment was 83%. Cohort 5 was

Table 2  
Program completion rates and baseline employment outcomes

|                                                       | Total     | Cohort 1<br>(2009-10) | Cohort 2<br>(2010-11) | Cohort 3<br>(2011-12) | Cohort 4<br>(2012-13) | Cohort 5<br>(2013-14) |
|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| # of Participants                                     | 144       | 14                    | 31                    | 29                    | 33                    | 37                    |
| # Completing Program                                  | 124 (86%) | 13 (93%)              | 24 (77%)              | 24 (83%)              | 31 (94%)              | 32 (86%)              |
| # Employed at Graduation (baseline) (% of completers) | 59 (48%)  | 8 (62%)               | 13 (54%)              | 16 (67%)              | 13 (42%)              | 9 (28%)               |
| # Hired by Host Business (% of completers)            | 30 (51%)  | 6 (75%)               | 7 (54%)               | 11 (69%)              | 8 (62%)               | 4 (44%)               |

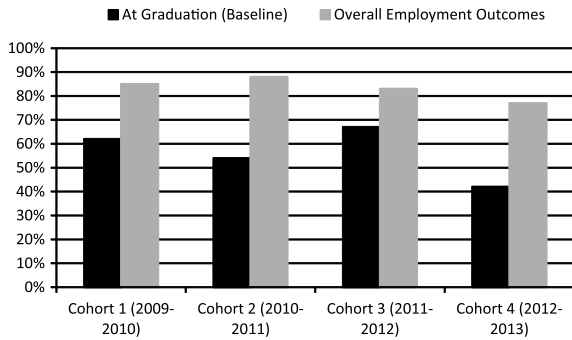


Fig. 1. Comparison of overall Monroe County, NY employment outcomes by cohort. (\*Note: Many students from Cohort 5 were still engaged in the job development process at the time of this report.)

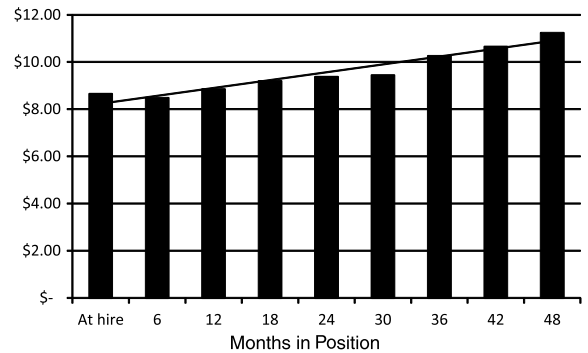


Fig. 2. Average wage per hour earned by Project SEARCH graduates, reported over time.

within the 6-month job development period as of the time of publication, and is not included in this average.

### 6. Longitudinal outcomes: Job growth and retention

Project SEARCH graduates saw steady increases in wages over time, growing to an average rate of \$11.24/hour at 4 years past program exit. As illustrated in Fig. 2, the average wage per hour remained relatively flat for the first year of employment, which is often a probationary period for new employees. However, beyond the one-year anniversary of employment, the average wage rose steadily at each subsequent data collection interval.

The number of hours per week worked by Project SEARCH graduates also rose over time, reaching an average of 35 hours/week at the 48-month period. As illustrated in Fig. 3, the average hours worked per week remained relatively flat for the first two years of employment (range: 22–24 hours/week). However, hours steadily increased from the 24- to 48-month time periods. At 48 months, 75% of participants were working 37.5 or more hours per week.

Job retention remained high at one year post exit, with 82% of graduates still employed. However, rates

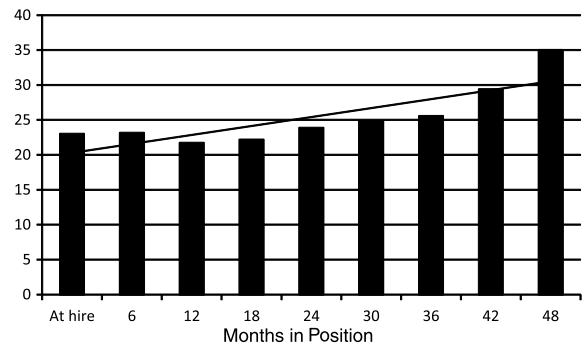


Fig. 3. Average number of hours Project SEARCH graduates work per week, reported over time.

of retention steadily declined at each subsequent data collection interval. By 48 months post exit, 44% of participants remained employed. The primary reasons for exit from the workforce include termination by employer (64%) and voluntarily leaving a position (20%). Some participants (12.1%) switched jobs at least once during data collection, but remained steadily employed for the duration of the 48-month data collection period. Only one participant exited competitive employment to pursue further vocational rehabilitation training. Despite the decline over time, job retention for Project SEARCH students was consistently higher than the average rate reported for individuals

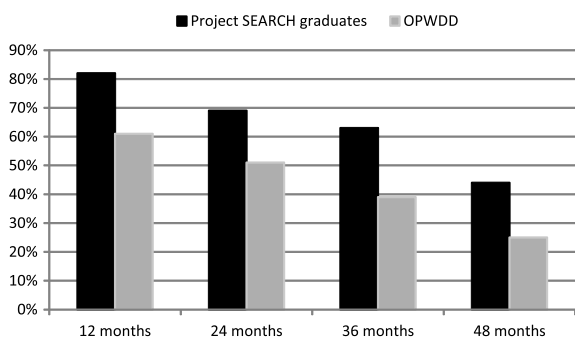


Fig. 4. Comparison of rates of job retention for Project SEARCH graduates in Monroe County, NY versus the typical supported employment job retention rates reported by the New York State Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD).

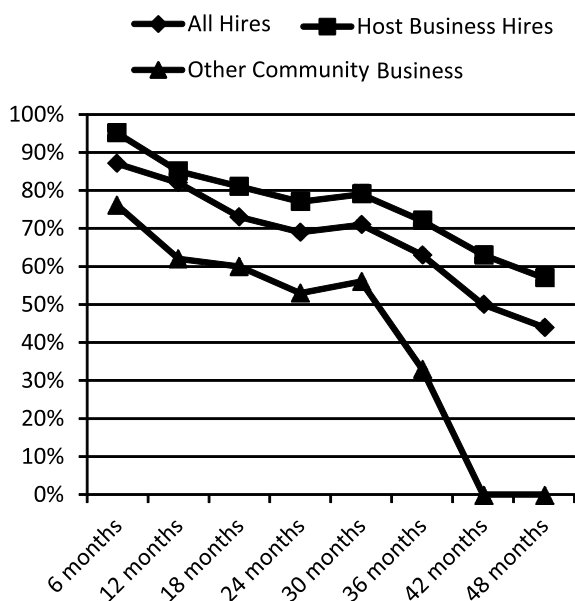


Fig. 5. Comparison of job retention rates over time between (a) participants hired by a Project SEARCH host business, (b) participants hired by another community employer, and (c) all participants who obtained employment.

receiving employment supports from the New York State developmental disabilities agency (Fig. 4). Job retention was also consistently higher at each data collection point for participants who were hired by a host Project SEARCH business versus participants hired by another employer in the community (Fig. 5). For those hired elsewhere in the community, job retention fell to 53% at two years post exit, and none of these participants were still employed at 48 months post exit.

### 7. Summary of findings

This evaluation of three Project SEARCH programs in Monroe County, NY, adds further evidence of the effectiveness and impact of the Project SEARCH model in transitioning high school students into competitive, integrated employment. Nationally, Project SEARCH has a success rate of 68% of program completers exiting into employment. The Monroe County effort considerably surpassed the national average with an overall rate of 84% over the first four years of implementation.

One of the stated benefits of the Project SEARCH model is the emphasis on cross-systems partnership, and the purposeful connection between vocational rehabilitation, education and adult supported employment services, which promotes a more seamless transition as a result of enhanced and coordinated transition planning (Daston, Riehle, & Rutkowski, 2012). Results of this evaluation suggest that this collaborative approach to providing transition-to-work training for high school students may also increase the likelihood of obtaining and maintaining employment over time. A comparison of baseline employment outcomes to overall program outcomes (Fig. 1) illustrates a consistent increase in the percentage of youth who successfully obtain employment within 6 months after exiting the program. This is important to note, as the traditional Project SEARCH model is ultimately a school program. At program completion, students exit the school system and are in need of ongoing supports from an adult service provider. Graduation from the program, for those participants who have not yet obtained employment, can present many challenges in terms of coordinating next steps towards employment. However, in the Project SEARCH model program participants are able to immediately engage in job development with assistance from a supported employment provider who already has a history and knowledge of the youth’s skills and career interests. This pre-established connection between youth and job coach can greatly expedite the process of seeking employment in the community, and represents a strength of this particular transition-to-work model.

The data also suggests the possibility that the relationship established between participant and supported employment provider during the Project SEARCH year has an impact on long-term employment outcomes. Project SEARCH graduates maintain employment at a higher rate over time compared to individuals receiving other employment supports funded by the New York State developmental disabilities agency. While this, in

part, can be attributed to the training and preparation gained in Project SEARCH, the reality is that not all program graduates are initially successful in the workforce. However, even in situations where the job is not a good fit, Project SEARCH graduates are able to quickly re-engage with their job developer and obtain employment elsewhere in the community. Furthermore, because of the cross-systems partnerships established through Project SEARCH, recommendations and referrals can be made for additional vocational training when it is determined that is needed to ensure the participant's success. In this case, both the vocational rehabilitation and developmental disabilities agencies are easily engaged to explore options that will best meet the immediate needs of the youth. Of note, this ongoing coordination of services continues to promote employment, as this is the sole desired outcome of Project SEARCH. This then has the potential to decrease the likelihood that youth who initially struggle in employment will disengage from the workforce and transition into day habilitation or other non-work programs.

Results also highlight the significance of the Project SEARCH host business in relation to project outcomes. All three programs included in this evaluation achieved the successful engagement of the host business, as evidenced by the consistently high percentage of program graduates who were offered employment upon completion of their internships during Project SEARCH. Implementation of Project SEARCH also appears to have a positive impact on the culture of the host businesses. Not only have these businesses demonstrated a willingness to hire people with disabilities, but they have also cultivated an atmosphere that fosters the long-term success for people with disabilities within the company. This level of commitment to the spirit and goals of Project SEARCH results in higher job retention among those graduates who remain with the host business as employees once their training is complete.

The analysis also evidences the notion that the engagement of the larger business community is necessary for Project SEARCH programs to achieve their full potential. Even with the benefit of an established relationship and history between the youth and the job developer, finding an appropriate job match outside of the host business remains a challenge. Of particular concern for the Monroe County programs is the ability of a host business to continue to hire Project SEARCH graduates at the rates achieved during the first four years of program implementation. Without the engagement of the larger business community in hiring Project

SEARCH graduates, it is likely that overall employment outcomes of these programs will eventually start to decline.

## **8. Limitations and opportunities for future research**

There are several limitations of this evaluation and analysis that are important to mention. The scope of data collection was limited to three sites in one community in Upstate New York, collected over a 5-year period of initial program implementation. Due to the small sample size, results cannot be generalized beyond Monroe County, NY.

In regards to the process for data collection, it should be noted that the process is reliant on self-reporting from supported employment provider agencies. As there was no statewide database to pull from, the evaluation team was reliant on providers to review their client records and submit updates on participant progress. Some participants either disengaged from services or moved out of the service area, making it impossible to confirm whether or not these individuals remained engaged in the workforce. For the purposes of reporting, these participants were coded as no longer engaged in the workforce. As a result, it is possible that the actual employment outcomes for these programs are underreported. Furthermore, because data collection took place in 6-month intervals, there are limitations to tracking job retention. Each data collection cycle marked a unique point in time, for which participants were dichotomously coded as either working or not working. There is a limited ability to track any gaps in employment based on the data collection process that was utilized. Future study is needed to address this gap in knowledge and reporting.

Finally, there is limited data available to compare Project SEARCH outcomes to other models for transition-to-work efforts in the local area or within New York State. While there are several other program models utilized, employment outcomes for those programs are not readily available. Additionally, there is not currently a statewide database that allows the means to obtain comparable employment outcomes for this same demographic through either the vocational rehabilitation or developmental disabilities agencies. As a result, it is not possible to assess how Project SEARCH graduates compare to their peers with disabilities in terms of rate of employment and job retention. The only direct comparison of outcomes that can be made is

against those reported by the National Project SEARCH database.

The results reported here would be strengthened by a larger representation of programs that cover a wider geographic area. Currently, outcome data is being collected from 13 Project SEARCH sites across New York State. This will generate a significantly larger sample size, and increase the ability to adequately describe the initial and long-term employment outcomes associated with Project SEARCH within the New York State context. However, it should be noted that data were not collected for the purposes of research, but rather as part of a program evaluation effort. A full-scale research study, looking at Project SEARCH outcomes in comparison to other transition-to-work efforts, is necessary in order to make any substantiated claims regarding the model's impact as an intervention in successfully transitioning high school students with disabilities into the adult working world.

## 9. Conclusion

This evaluation of Project SEARCH, while localized and small in scope, strengthens the growing base of evidence regarding the success and impact of the model in preparing high school students with disabilities to transition into competitive, integrated employment. Further, this study makes the original contribution of providing a promising first glimpse of long-term employment outcomes associated with the Project SEARCH model. Not only did the employment outcomes of the studied programs exceed the National Project SEARCH average, but program graduates maintained employment over time at a rate that was higher than typical for this same population in based on data from the New York State developmental disabilities agency. This publication marks the first attempt to document and describe the long-term impact of Project SEARCH on job retention. The collaborative approach to assessment and training, which is the cornerstone of a Project SEARCH program, resulted in coordinated transition planning and increased likelihood that participants would remain engaged in employment services after program completion. Furthermore, the partnership with a single host business was shown to be integral to the success of programs, and led to strong initial and long-term employment outcomes. However, a limitation to success can be found when the larger business community is not appropriately engaged, thus limiting the options for employment for graduates despite the

high level of preparedness achieved as a result of participation in a Project SEARCH program.

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