

# Training Needs of State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies (SVRAs)

## Introduction

The U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration federally funded Innovative Rehabilitative Training Program (CFDA Number 84.263c) for Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling supports the preparation of vocational rehabilitation professionals. A five-year grant under this program was awarded to the George Washington University where the Center for Innovative Training in Vocational Rehabilitation (CIT-VR) was developed and facilitated on October 1, 2019. This Innovative Rehabilitation Training Program has three main goals:

- Develop new types of training programs for rehabilitation personnel and demonstrate the effectiveness of these training programs for rehabilitation personnel in providing services to individuals with disabilities;
- Design new and improved methods of training rehabilitation personnel so that there may be a more effective delivery of rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities; and
- Develop new innovative training programs for VR professionals and paraprofessionals to have a 21st-century understanding of the evolving labor force and the needs of individuals with disabilities so they can more effectively provide VR services to individuals with disabilities.

*The objective was to develop new types of training program for rehabilitation personnel through the development and dissemination of the State Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (SVRA) Training Needs Survey (SVRATNS).* The SVRATNS would be administered to key staff in VR agencies. The SVRATNS also included questions related to learning styles and training delivery preferences for content and delivery.

The CIT-VR Advisory Council, consisting of SVRA training coordinators and representatives from national agencies addressing vocational rehabilitation practice, service, and training, was created to gather ongoing direct input from the VR field about training needs to help drive content development.



The advisory council also serves as a mechanism for ongoing and continuous improvement related content development and delivery methods.

The CIT-VR advisory board membership includes representatives from State Vocational Rehabilitation agencies who serve in the role of Training Coordinator (i.e., Florida (FL-G), Idaho (ID-G), Indiana (IN-C), Michigan (MI-G), Minnesota (MN-G), Virginia (VA-G), Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB), National Council on Rehabilitation Education (NCRE), and National Council of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC).

## The CIT-VR Survey

### Development of the Survey

The CIT-VR project staff met monthly beginning in October 2019 to address the development, piloting, refinement, and dissemination of the survey. The content of the survey would include participant position title/category and address plus four areas described as (1) attrition in SVRAs, (2) identified training needs, (3) training specific to position, and (4) the importance rating of training topics. The first draft was presented to CIT-VR Advisory Council members for feedback on December 17, 2019. Feedback was received and minor wording and ordering of questions were completed. The revised survey was presented again to the CIT-VR Advisory Council members on January 3, 2020. The Survey was created in Survey Gizmo on January 16, 2020. On January 23, 2020 the CIT-VR Project Director completed the CIT-VR survey in Survey Gizmo using three different positions found in SVRAs (see Table 1 below) in order to ensure that survey was functioning properly. The final edit addressed adding a text box to a write-in response.

### Dissemination

On February 13, 2020 the CIT-VR Project Director sent an introductory letter to the NCSAB president and to the CSAVR Director of Research and Grants describing the Center for Innovative Training in Vocational Rehabilitation (CIT-VR), CIT-VR training development, and goals. Both organizations are membership organizations composed of administrators of the 78 State VR agencies across the country. It was requested that they disseminate the link to the survey to their membership with instructions to further disseminate the link to access the survey to their staff. A deadline for completion of the survey was established by February 28, 2020.



## Results

The content of the survey included respondent position title/category and addressed four areas described as (1) attrition in SVRAs, (2) identified training needs, (3) training specific to position, and (4) the importance rating of training topics. A total of 369 respondents completed the survey. Of respondents, 63.1% represented persons providing direct services (i.e., Vocational rehabilitation counselors, Para professionals, Business Engagement Specialists) to persons with disabilities (see Table 1). The method staff used to access web-based learning was identified as the computer at their work station and tablet.

**Table 1: Survey Respondents by Position title/Category**

<b>Position Title/Category</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors	157	42.5%
Manager/Supervisor	60	16.3%
Paraprofessionals (i.e., vocational technician)	40	10.8%
Business Engagement Specialists	36	9.8%
VR Directors	28	7.6%
Administrators	27	7.3%
Training Coordinators	21	5.7%

### Attrition in SVRAs

Of responses (n=111) the majority of respondents (64.0%) reported a high rate of attrition among their SVRA. Of responses (n=201) the length of time served in their current role was reported as 5 years or less by the majority of participants (54.6%); whereas 20.7% reported 5 to 10 years and 16.0% reported 10 to 20 years. Of responses (n=69) VR counselors were reported as typically leaving the agency within two years of hire date 50.7% (n=35) and 78.2% (n=54) leave the agency before completing 5 years of employment. The reasons for attrition were identified by the majority of respondents (62.7%) as low pay. Additional reasons were reported by 28% or fewer participants and need further exploration. These include high demands of the job (i.e., stress, overworked), high cases load, poor management (i.e., supervision, communication, lack of support), lack of training opportunities, an aging workforce (i.e., retirement), and limited career advancement. The top three factors to enhance service delivery within SVRAs were reported as agency communication, employee training, and case management.



**Recommendation:** The responses suggest that retention efforts could be prioritized during the first two years of employment and maintained through the fifth year of employment that include offering competitive salaries to reduce frequency of new hire training costs, training opportunities, career trajectories, better agency communication, better supervision, and supportive work environments. Exploration of current retention strategies and career trajectories with additional SRVAS is suggested.

## Identified Training Needs

Three training needs were identified by the majority (62.1%) of respondents (n=229) as (1) Overview of Disabilities and Accommodations in the Workplace, (2) Overview of the Vocational Rehabilitation (e.g., VR 101 series), and (3) Effective communication strategies was identified by 54.4% (n=199) respondents.

*The top three training needs reported during respondent's last Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment were identified as WIOA (i.e., impact on service delivery, data/reporting, impact on VR services) and Pre-Employment Transition Services.*

Three training priorities were identified, at most 32.3% of respondents (n=67), as (1) Vocational counseling and guidance (i.e., specific significant disabilities, youth, customers in rural area, Autism/Neurodiverse populations, hard of hearing and deaf population, low vision, functional limitations, mental illness, autism, Intellectual Disability, how to guide customers, how to empower customers, SE, specialized services), WIOA (i.e., effective WIOA partnerships as a team for consumers, measurable skill gains, credentialing, eligibility planning, counseling within fiscal restraints, working with parents, suicidal youth, high-risk youth, transition age youth, students, customer families, vocational goals for their IPE), and Pre-ETS (i.e., developing best practices, creating innovative services to address transition needs, classroom Management, Lesson Plan Creation, Keeping Students Engaged). Suggesting that further exploration is needed as the response rate is 18.2% of respondents.

**Recommendation:** The responses suggest that training need topics are identified by frequency as WIOA, Pre-ETS, Overview of Disabilities and Accommodations in the Workplace, Overview of the Vocational Rehabilitation and, Effective communication strategies. Exploration of the history of training offered and access to current training with SRVAS is suggested.

## Training specific to position

Staff training to better perform business engagement functions for the organizations were identified, by more than 50% of respondents, as beneficial for included (1) customized employment strategies, (1) accommodations in the workplace, (3) effective communication, and (4) managing change.



Paraprofessional training needs to enhance current job performance were identified by more than 50% of respondents (n=199) as (1) effective communication strategies, (2) customer service strategies, and (3) overview of Vocational Rehabilitation. Three types of online training modules helpful for paraprofessionals to assist them on embarking on a career pathway that leads to a professional role at the agency were reported as (1) communication, (2) customer service, (3) case management, and (4) VR 101. The responses of the two questions support three specific training topics for VR paraprofessionals.

Middle management trainings reported by respondents as beneficial to support the work of the direct service staff as supervision strategies were identified as (1) Coaching strategies to improve staff performance, (2) Effective communication strategies, (3) managing change, and (4) implementing provisions under WIOA. The top three post-training steps used by the agency to encourage and facilitate staff to implement new skill sets were reported by the majority of respondents as (1) ongoing coaching by supervisor, (2) staff are expected to implement skill sets and practice on their own, and (3) peer mentoring.

**Recommendations:** Respondents provided 17 responses regarding training needs specific to positions. Collectively, the most frequent (n=5) training need identified was communication (i.e., agency, effective) followed by customer service (n=2), case management (n=2), managing change (n=2) and VR 101 (i.e., overview of vocational rehabilitation; n=2). The topics of communication and customer service are related and are likely to impact employee retention. This should be further assessed within SVRAs to identify existing policies and protocols. Exploration of the history of training offered and access to current training with SRVAS is suggested.

### Importance Rating of Training Topics

Of the stated training needs, only two topics (1) Coaching strategies for supervisors (coaching skill sets to promote high performance of rehabilitation personnel) and (2) Disability and Workplace (Accommodations and customization in the workplace) and were identified by the majority of respondents as *Very Important* or *Important*. Of the 32 training topics, 15 (46.9%) were rated as *Very Important* and 17 (53.1%) were rated as *Important* (see Table 2)



**Table 2: Ratings of Training Topics**

<b>Very important (n=15)</b>	<b>Important (n=17)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Coaching strategies for supervisors (coaching skill sets to promote high performance of rehabilitation personnel). 55.9% (n=180)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Partnership development .46.5% (n=147)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Disability and Workplace (Accommodations and customization in the workplace). 52.8% (n=171)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Individual placement and support. 45.4% (n=147)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Career Pathways (strategies for supporting career opportunities). 49.5% (n=161)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Strategies for improving supported employment outcomes. 45.0% (n=145)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Person-Centered Practices (supporting individuals with disabilities to have positive control over their lives). 48.1% (n=156)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Consumer engagement strategies. 45.0% (n=144)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Understanding the evolving workforce (how to prepare consumers for a changing workforce). 48.0% (n=155)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Negotiation skills (an emphasis on negotiating with employers). 44.7% (n=143)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Personal management strategies (managing your time and setting priorities). 47.2% (n=153)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Working with Next Generation: Students/youth and social media. 44.4% (n=143)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Braiding and leveraging resources (identifying and developing new partnerships to effectively address the needs of your customers). 43.3% (n=140)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Understanding SSA benefits and work incentives. 44.0% (n=142)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Collaboration-team work (effective strategies to promote team work in the agency and with community partners). 42.9% (n=158)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Using data to inform decision-making. 43.9% (n=140)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Integrated Resources Team model (building systemic capacity and collaboration through braiding and leveraging resources). 42.8% (n=139)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Customized employment. 42.7% (n=137)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Customer Service (Developing customer-friendly practices in your agency). 42.7% (n=138)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Analysis of transferable skills. 42.6% (n=135)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Understanding common performance measures under WIOA. 41.4% (n=134)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Intersection of disability and poverty (exploring multidimensional factors that impact participation in VR training programs and employment). 40.0% (n=128)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Introduction to Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS; review of core elements to archive compliance with</li> </ul>



<b>Very important (n=15)</b>	<b>Important (n=17)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Managing change (strategies to effectively manage change personally and in your organization). 42.1% (n=135)</li> <li>➤ Working collaboratively with your core partners in the Workforce Development System. 41.6% (n=131)</li> <li>➤ Decision-making &amp; problem solving (strategies to deal with life's complexities). 40.5% (n=130)</li> <li>➤ Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS; Next steps; moving beyond required services). 39.3% (n=127)</li> <li>➤ Creating inclusive environments (embracing diversity in your organization). 39.1% (n=126)</li> <li>➤ Effective writing tips for VR professionals (case notes and documentation). 34.9% (n=112)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the Code of Federal Regulations deriving from WIOA). 39.2% (n=124)</li> <li>➤ Labor Market Research and Analysis (including the use of LMI to assist in informed career choices for our customers). 39.0% (n=126)</li> <li>➤ Financial literacy and empowerment. 39.0% (n=126)</li> <li>➤ Implicit bias (how bias impacts service delivery to individuals with disabilities). 38.6% (n=124)</li> </ul>

### Identification of Additional Training Topics

Respondents were asked to identify other training topics. The 66 responses were reviewed from which five participant identified themes presented as: Building collaborations (e.g., employers, community partnerships, service providers), Effective communication strategies (i.e., consumers, management, employers, clients, families, disability groups), Counseling Skills (i.e., techniques, practice, supervisory feedback), Diversity training (i.e., disability, equity, LGBTQ, sexuality), and Ethics (i.e., practice, technology, professional behavior).

Respondents were also asked to also provide additional feedback that may not have been addressed in the training topics they were asked to rate as very important or important. The 79 responses were reviewed from which five participant identified feedback themes presented as: (1) Community engagement, (i.e., community assess VR services, community informs service provision), (2) Data informed decisions (i.e., within agencies, funding, salary, services), Trainer skill (i.e., recent experience,

application to topics presented), (3) Training content (i.e., needs to be realistic, implementation applicable across sites, application applicable across (i.e., urban, rural, large communities, small communities), and (4) Training VR specific subject (i.e., VR common protocols, main systems counselors use every day).

**Recommendation:** Respondents identified additional training topics, of which addressed within agency operations (i.e., communication strategies, data informed decisions), community VR relationships (i.e., building collaboration, community engagement), profession skill development (i.e., counseling skills, diversity, ethics), and trainer specific (i.e., experienced, able to apply content, knowledgeable of VR systems). This should be further assessed within SVRAs to identify existing training that addresses operations, community relationships, and skill development. Persons providing VR training should be knowledgeable of VR operations, policies, and able to apply content to demonstrate application of training content.

## About CIT-VR

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The Center for Innovative Training in Vocational Rehabilitation (CIT-VR) is managed by the George Washington University Center for Rehabilitation Counseling Research and Education, in partnership with San Diego State University and the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation.

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**The GW Center for Rehabilitation Counseling Research and Education (GRCRE) aims to enhance research and provide opportunities for growth and development to a diverse population including persons with disabilities.**

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