

# Leveraging the Trust: The Role of University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs) in Facilitating Competitive Integrated Employment Outcomes

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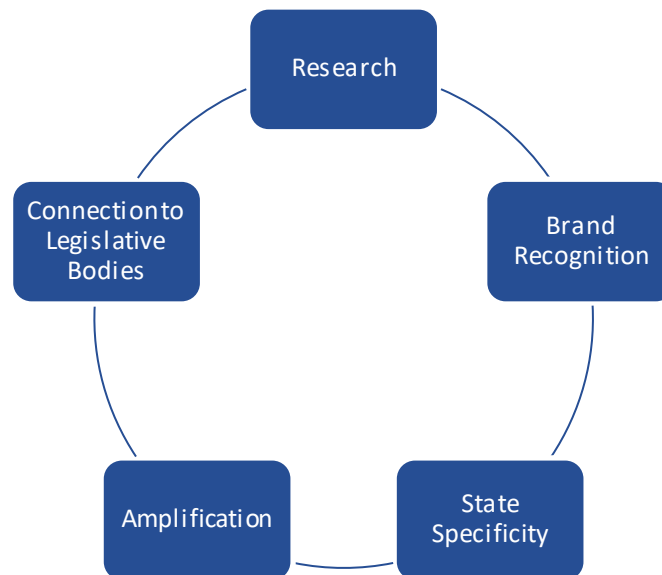
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## Introduction

The [Edelman Trust Barometer](#)<sup>i</sup>, a global in-depth survey facilitated for twenty years by the communications firm of the same name, found in 2020 that universities have built-in elements to amplify the importance of specific issues. Experts, students, and alumni can all be harnessed to help solve economic and social conditions of specific communities. In the annual survey, 73% of people reported respecting educational organizations that strive to use their resources in this way.<sup>ii</sup> To this end, UCEDDs represent a significant vehicle for accelerating the importance of increasing the competitive integrated employment rates of youth and adults with disabilities. This sphere of influence is generated through several UCEDD-specific factors, which, if purposely examined, can lead to a methodical, and judicious use of the resources UCEDDs can deploy within their Developmental Disability (DD) Networks as well as to other Administration on Disability (AoD) grantees within the state and beyond.



**Exhibit 1. Five Levers for UCEDDs to Deploy in Promoting the Employment of People with Disabilities**



## **Research**

Of the 67 UCEDDs operating in the United States, nearly 75% are housed in Research I Universities. The [Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education](#)<sup>iii</sup> considers a university as a Research I entity possessing Very High Research Activity if it awards more than 50 doctoral degrees each year and has been granted \$40 million or more in federal research support annually. The 131 Research I universities in the United States are well-equipped to engage in researching the burgeoning area of evidence-based employment supports replete with fidelity instruments. And for UCEDDs located in a Research I university, this provides them with the infrastructure and ability to harness the expertise of field practitioners, in tandem with researchers, to fully investigate and vet the services and supports state mental health, developmental disability agencies, and vocational rehabilitation programs invest in through the use of state and federal taxes.

## **Brand Recognition**

The visibility of state universities is deep, easily recognizable, and accessible to all sectors of local economies. While most taxpayers and employers cannot name their state's DD Network, or its state agencies engaged in funding employment supports and services, these same people can readily identify the logos, mascots, and major initiatives of their universities, which, of course, includes the UCEDDs affiliated with the universities. While a great deal of this comes through sports, the familiarity is established nonetheless and reflects an opportunity to engage business, government, and high-demand workforce development opportunities. In addition, this brand recognition can be utilized in job development, in amplifying disability unemployment rates, and educating policy makers regarding economic motivators such as return-on-investment and purchasing power.

## **State Specificity**

Research performed with a national focus rather than being State-specific has less impact on constituents and stakeholders. Extrapolating what might be pertinent to a State can make the message weaker. Training and technical assistance to improve systems which is specific rather than generic will be easier to codify, operationalize, and trust. Universities may be the penultimate expression of state specific economic activities, and UCEDDs can participate in these efforts by recognizing the value of the data related to households with members with a developmental disability. Advocating for change, transformation, funding, and full participation is stronger when focused on the challenges and barriers related to a specific state, a local community, and its economic activity. To this end, UCEDDs, via the universities they are attached to, should take a lead in providing expertise to the efforts regarding increasing the rates of CIE by pursuing research and training that are informed locally, and driven by state needs assessments.

## **Amplification**

One of the most impactful stories of amplification surrounding intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID/DD) can be seen in the proliferation of inclusive post-secondary education programs. Since 2004 more than 265 programs have been created to provide the opportunity for students with the labels of ID/DD to attend college, and to be immersed in the university experience.<sup>iv</sup> Students develop social capital, gain skills, and develop opportunities for



employment through career exploration. While it was virtually unheard of twenty years ago, the stories of students with ID/DD attending high-profile universities have gone mainstream. Much of this advancement can be accredited to the inherent capacity of university systems to spread the best-practices related to inclusion, to share demonstration grant outcomes to influence what will become standard practice, and to leverage trust to garner additional supporters. This type of persuasive knowledge transfer can be utilized in efforts related to amplifying *Employment First* initiatives<sup>v</sup>, and thereby increasing rates of competitive integrated employment for youth and adults with developmental disabilities.

### **Connection to Legislative Bodies**

In the United States there are approximately 7,500 state legislators.<sup>vi</sup> Because of their inherent roles, many of these elected personnel have deep roots to their university systems, and often are graduates of the colleges that operate in communities across states. State legislative bodies are aware of the power education plays in economic development, workforce solutions, and the on-going advancement of both businesses, constituents, and voters. UCEDDs benefit from this scenario in that the brand of the university system is strong, easily understandable, and trustworthy. This enables information, research, recommendations, and expertise to reach elected officials in an efficient manner. Policy from state disability and rehabilitation entities can be dense, and mostly concerned with annual appropriations which can lead elected officials to the conclusion that all they can do to help is through a budget resolution. However, by focusing on messages supported by universities, and by default the associated UCEDDs, legislative bodies can be influenced to focus on the rates of employment and unemployment of citizens with the label of developmental disabilities. Again, trust, brand recognition, and the expertise of UCEDD staff can be leveraged to make the message of *Employment First* clearer, stronger, and more impactful than simple budget requests.



With a suitable appreciation for the unique traits that UCEDDs possess, the exploration of how to make the most of the university associated footprint can be pursued. To capitalize on this framework, it's instructive to look at four major categories: 1) Dissemination; 2) Convening and Collaborating; 3) Economic Development; and 4) Training and Technical Assistance. Examples and tips for getting started are offered for each of these essential UCEDD functions related to increasing the rates of competitive integrated employment for youth and adults with developmental disabilities.

## **Four Major Initiatives that Allow UCEDDs to Influence Competitive Integrated Employment**

### **Dissemination**

Perhaps one of the clearest statements related to the use of research comes from the father of applied social psychology, [Kurt Lewin](#)<sup>vii</sup>: “No research without action, no action without research.” This mantra is often overlooked, with reams of both quantitative and qualitative research seemingly pursued and created for the sake of the scientific method itself. UCEDDs can amplify research findings related to employment and disability, whether that content is self-generated or has originated at another research entity, but simply forwarding reports is not enough. In the last



decade, a great deal of work has gone into making research findings easily understood, so that the conclusions can be acted upon to improve the related outcomes. This can be seen with the advent of evidence-based practices such as Individual Placement and Supports (IPS) - Supported Employment, and more recently as it relates to Customized Employment.<sup>viii</sup> The research conclusions are clear: pre-vocational programs, traditional assessments, readiness stances, and other unproven interventions do not contribute to higher rates of employment, yet many policy makers, elected officials, and job seekers with disabilities are not privy to this information. Therefore, as it relates to dissemination of proven, fidelity-based employment supports, UCEDDs can play the role of translator, taking esoteric findings and explaining them in actionable policy and funding recommendations.

#### Example

A UCEDD commissioned a report on evidence-based employment supports and targeted funders, advocates, job seekers and their families, as well as trade groups for specific dissemination.

#### Tips

Summarize dense reports, explain findings in language and terms that are easily understood. Disseminate with purpose, and with an eye on convening vested public-private partnerships. Consider the various non-typical audiences interested in employment and disability, such as general workforce development entities, business trade groups, and local elected officials; link their missions to the research findings. Don't simply forward or post research reports without a messaging hook and a communications goal.

### Convening



“Bringing people together in an environment that encourages and facilitates idea exchange is one of the most powerful communications strategies for driving change.”<sup>ix</sup> University settings have been used for centuries to bring together a broad range of stakeholders. The reasons for this include the aforementioned brand recognition, trust, and inherent research capacity. This type of convening includes symposiums, lectures, expert panels, annual meetings, and conferences. In recent years, universities have embraced public-private partnerships to improve socio-economic conditions of specific communities. In addition, the act of convening contains a fundamental intersectionality with research, the findings being disseminated among partners or even as the focus of the convening itself. As it pertains to employment and disability, UCEDDs can harness the act of convening to amplify lived-experience, highlight systemic fragmentation, offer up policy recommendations, and emphasize the untapped resource of job seekers with disabilities. Convening can break down siloed state agencies, improve communications between organizations working on similar issues, and bring a sense of community to the topic of focus. Even more, the opportunity to convene, in-person or virtually, can build social capital among funders, advocates, job seekers, families, and



employers. If UCEDDs can see this fundamental role as critical to the improvement in employment outcomes, then the ancillary departments within the university can also become involved, such as business schools, journalism departments, and any number of career and technical college entities that regularly interface with universities. By taking time to consider the act of convening, UCEDDs can take the lead in bringing together the necessary people, agencies, research, and resources needed to advance employment opportunities for youth and adults with disabilities. Convening is providing the space, time and focus required to formulate systems change and to establish and grow Communities of Practice.

#### Example

A UCEDD convened a roundtable of provider agency leadership and Human Resource representatives to review and discuss the Customized Employment Competency Model. The participants were then led through an exercise that focused on changing the ways staff are recruited, hired, and retained, with an emphasis on looking at the personalities of staff connected to the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other traits (KSAOs) required in the competencies.

#### Tips

Convening should always begin with a thorough understanding of what is hoped to be accomplished. Furthermore, having a grasp on how to best follow-up after the convening event has concluded is best-practice. Consider what Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) tool will be used to track progress. No convening just for the sake of meeting!

### ***Economic Development***

By the nature of being housed within a university setting, UCEDDs can partner with business and management schools, as well as other departments that are heavily vested in the state's economic development efforts. Many of the Research I Universities in the United States either convene annual economic meetings or provide much of a state's growth forecasts. Since households with a member with developmental disabilities represent \$66 billion annually in purchasing power, there is ample opportunity to include economic indicators related to disability and employment.<sup>x</sup> In addition to purchasing power, the return-on-investment to taxpayers related to increasing competitive integrated employment rates, as well as disposable income, and improved mental and physical health can be highlighted through the lens of economic development. UCEDDs occupy a unique space where they can link the issues of disability policy to economic activity internally, and externally through dissemination and convening opportunities. The disconnect between funding services and supports that make both social and financial sense can be ameliorated by active research, collaboration, and purposeful messaging. Self-employment and micro-enterprise entities can be engaged and made aware that for many job seekers with disabilities, operating a small business venture can create assets, contribute to local economic activity, and provide diversity in the marketplace. Transforming the communications away from a pity, deficit-based approach,



which is rampant within state agencies and provider trade groups, and toward economic opportunities is necessary to advance employment opportunities.

#### Example

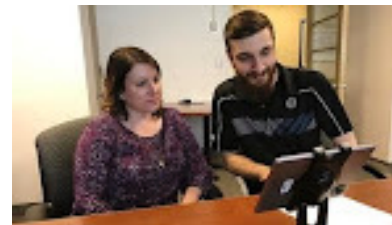
A UCEDD created a presentation focused solely on the economic aspects of workers with disabilities, highlighting taxpayer benefits and purchasing power. The UCEDD staff, along with local provider agency staff, engaged in job development, presented the material to local business groups, and profiled several job seekers through visual resumes. The university footprint was leveraged through logos and local extension offices.

#### Tips

Partner with business and management schools within the university where the UCEDD resides. Seek to make state economic activity and development specific to counties, towns, and cities. Use the university's reputation to open doors with alumni in those geographic areas. Focus on economic reasons for employment rather than programmatic. Citizens readily recognize university icons, and few are interested in bureaucratic operations of state agencies.

### ***Training and Technical Assistance***

Perhaps the most obvious role of a UCEDD in the transformation of systems to *Employment First* lies in the area of training, teaching, and side-by-side mentoring. After all, that is one of the major components that make up university operations. From understanding adult learning principles, to creating curriculums, a UCEDD is steeped deeply in learning, educating, and knowledge transfer. Critical to this type of support is ensuring that the other focus areas (Dissemination, Convening and Economic Development) have been pursued and implemented. UCEDDs can offer continuing education, credentialing, certifications, and work-based learning for practitioners of employment supports and do so by ensuring that all training is rooted in the most recent evidence-based tools and approaches. This important action of providing training and technical assistance can be further bolstered by returning to the built-in capacity for UCEDDs to use their research expertise to evaluate and disseminate the progress. A feedback loop that can be analyzed to identify gaps in skill sets, additional training, and the need for on-going mentoring is a fundamental element for any organization offering training. Lastly, since the field of employment supports is just now embracing evidence-based practices and the use of fidelity scale instruments, UCEDDs may also offer programmatic reviews with associated improvement plans and do so for both funders and providers alike.





### Example

A UCEDD created and staffed the provision of an ACRE (Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators) credential that includes trainees from in-state, out-of-state, and internationally. In addition, UCEDD staff partnered with a full-service consultancy group to arrange the provision of specialty training in IPS - Supported Employment and Customized Employment.

### Tips

Strive to make a critical analysis of what types of subject matter experts are on staff. Partner with other UCEDDs or DD Network entities, training providers, and credentialing bodies if there is missing expertise internally. If so, make certain to evaluate the training and technical assistance so that continuous quality improvement can be managed. Work with provider trade groups to fully understand their workforce needs.

## Summary

Universities are influential in the day-to-day operations of a state's economic life, offering expertise, research, and trusted convening functions. UCEDDs can help facilitate the transformation to competitive integrated employment if there is role clarity, a measure of purposefulness, and a spirit of collaboration. Leveraging a university's footprint to include the myriad of issues to be solved related to disability and employment, offers UCEDDs a unique bridging role, translating often dense research and state agency bureaucratic tendencies so that elected officials, businesses, and policy makers are apt to make informed conclusions. Making certain that lived-experience is valued at all junctures is a must, including a commitment to diversity, inclusion, and shared decision-making. The unique characteristics of UCEDDs put forth in this assessment can be deployed to make significant systems change, but only if there exists a certain desire to do so.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2021-trust-barometer>

<sup>ii</sup> The Importance of Trust in Academia: Tateoka, J. 2020: <https://www.edelman.com/research/importance-of-trust-in-academia>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.pacer.org/transition/learning-center/postsecondary/college-options.asp>

<sup>v</sup> *Employment First* is a national framework for systems change efforts that result in increased community-based, integrated employment opportunities for individuals with significant disabilities. Employment First state initiatives are centered on the premise that **all** citizens, including individuals with significant disabilities, are capable of full participation in integrated employment and community life. Under this approach, publicly-financed systems are urged to align policies, service delivery practices, and reimbursement structures to commit to competitive integrated employment as the priority option with respect to the use of publicly-financed day and employment services for youth and adults with significant disabilities. Many states have formally committed to the *Employment First* framework through official executive proclamation or formal legislative action. You can learn more about the *Employment First* movement and download numerous resources through the Association of Persons Supporting



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Employment 1<sup>st</sup> ([www.apse.org](http://www.apse.org)), the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP)

<https://aoddisabilityemploymentcenter.com/>.

<sup>vi</sup> <https://system.uslegal.com/state-legislatures/>

<sup>vii</sup> Clem Adelman (1993) Kurt Lewin and the Origins of Action Research, Educational Action Research, 1:1, 7-24, DOI: 10.1080/0965079930010102. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/0965079930010102>

<sup>viii</sup> Internal Consistency of the Customized Employment Discovery Fidelity Scale: A Preliminary Study:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00343552211043259>

<sup>ix</sup> The Power of Convening for Social Impact: Stanford Social Innovation Review:

[https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the\\_power\\_of\\_convening\\_for\\_social\\_impact](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_power_of_convening_for_social_impact)

<sup>x</sup> The Nielsen Consumer and Shopper Analytics, July 2017.

