

The Potential Promise of Inclusive Postsecondary Education

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The United States economy is thriving, building an ideal marketplace to create sustainable employment of persons with disabilities. However, a paradigm shift needs to occur to fully and seamlessly integrate these employees into the workforce. High levels of unemployment have led to increased calls for workplace diversity, stressing the need to include persons with disabilities who have traditionally experienced marginal or no attachment to the labor force. Despite the positive attributes of these circumstances, several critical factors are often overlooked which may result in deepening the economic and social disparities of persons with disabilities and their experience relative to their nondisabled peers. Through this introduction to the issue, we look at economic conditions to underscore the need for this paradigm shift, and the role of inclusive postsecondary education as a means for recognizing the inherent talents and value offered by persons with disabilities (Green et al., 2017; Kelley & Buchanan, 2017).

Through our analysis, we have identified several factors to consider that suggest the present “tight labor market” offers the right environment to increase the employment of persons with disabilities. For the purpose of this paper we will address the area of marginalization by looking at a more accurate depiction of long-term economic conditions for persons with disabilities. This includes how they experience far greater difficulty with becoming employed, if they are unemployed, and the length of time it takes to recover from unemployment. Once in a cycle of poverty, it is even harder to break that cycle, thereby marginalizing an already at-risk population. In response to these factors, we offer an examination of a promising intervention in the form of IPSE and the benefits it represents to a sample population of the disability community, persons with intellectual and development disabilities (IDD). Finally, we place our analysis within the context of the changing nature of work in the United States represented by the confluence of changing social, legislative, economic, and technological conditions impacting persons with disabilities. Ultimately, we suggest that a holistic approach to systems change, leveraging practices such as IPSE, is necessary.

Framing the Position

Following the Great Recession of 2008-2009, there was little optimism in the U.S. labor market as unemployment levels surged and market indicators plummeted. By "unemployment", we use the Bureau of Labor Statistics definition which includes people who are jobless, and those looking for and available to work. The unemployment rate does not include people in institutions and, for purposes of our examination, excludes the millions of persons with disabilities who are disconnected from the labor force and not seeking employment for a variety of factors.

During this time, persons with disabilities experienced increased adversity, as evidenced by higher levels of unemployment, marginal or no attachment to the labor force, and higher rates of poverty compared to the general population (Livermore & Honeycutt, 2015). In the ensuing ten years, the fortunes of the country have changed dramatically with record low unemployment rates reported across demographics throughout 2018-2019.

It is important to note that unemployment of persons with disabilities is not accurately captured in the standard measurement of unemployment due to a variety of reasons including institutionalized individuals and individuals that have given up in seeking employment not being counted as unemployed (Vanbergeijk, 2019). The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019) has measured that persons with disabilities have given up on seeking employment at a rate of 8 out of 10. A true picture of employment for people with disabilities is further complicated through greater part-time employment and a higher rate of self-employment than their counterparts without disabilities (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

The oft-referenced "tight labor market" has led to increased consideration of persons with disabilities to fill vacant jobs (Elejalde-Ruiz & Mensik, 2018). This phenomenon of previously sidelined workers re-entering the labor market during times of sustained economic growth is not new. Studies confirm basic economic theory that as labor market competition increases, employers are more prone to expand their aperture of diversity hiring, including individuals likely to experience a variety of stigma, in the hopes of maintaining production levels while managing costs (Ross & Bateman, 2018). Uniquely, for persons with disabilities, the current cycle of re-examining their inherent value to the economy has been fueled by calls for greater societal inclusion. And while increased recognition of untapped economic and social contributions is positive, the current discourse masks a vicious cycle of marginal progress followed by periods of significant loss that persons with disabilities experience when the economy slows and enters periods of recession.

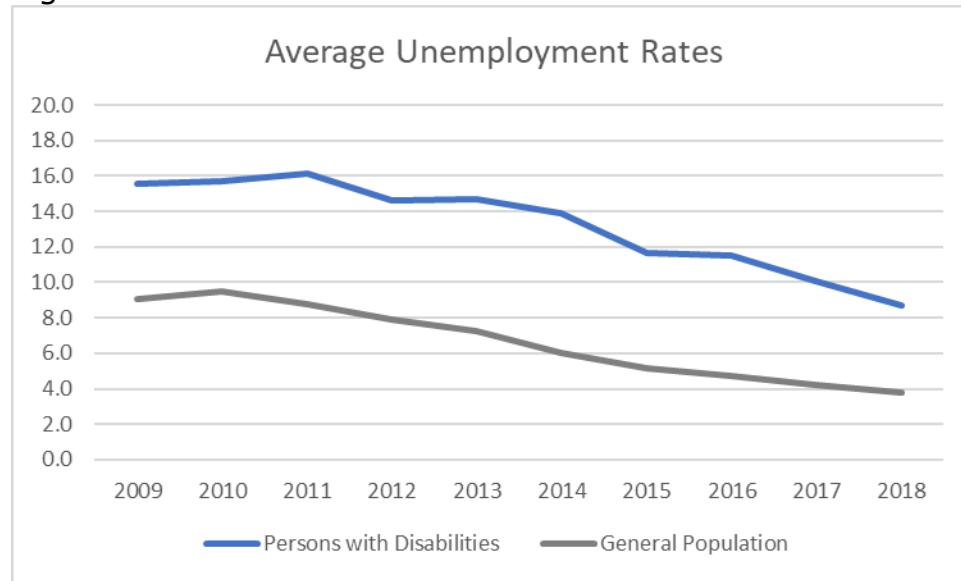
As the US economy enters what is predicted to be the tail-end of a prolonged period of growth, we must not squander the opportunity to address the system changes needed to ensure a more inclusive future. Specifically, there is an urgent need to identify how to dramatically increase the percentage of persons with disabilities participating in the labor market and employed at sustainable, meaningful jobs.

Marketplace Conditions

The economic statistic that garners the most attention in the daily news cycle is the unemployment rate. Viewed in isolation, without regard for other indicators of economic and social inclusion, it is understandable to feel a sense of optimism with the unemployment level at historically low levels. This applies across demographic groups including those who have traditionally experienced marginal or no attachment to the labor force. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2018, the unemployment rate for persons without disabilities ages 16-64 was 3.8 percent. Comparatively, the unemployment rate for persons with disabilities 16-64 was 8.7 percent. Although the rate is more than double for persons with disabilities, it is still a marked improvement over the rate of 10.1 percent for persons with disabilities recorded for 2017. The unemployment rate of 2018 marks a record low for both persons with and without disabilities (see Figure 1).

Specific to our analysis, we attach a high degree of concern to the coupling of low unemployment rates across demographics and increased levels of optimism for the economic inclusion of persons with disabilities. Throughout 2018, media outlets have reiterated a claim that the unemployment rate has created the ideal scenario for persons with disabilities to rejoin the labor force (Davidson, 2018; Paquette, 2018; Tedeschi, 2018). Without discounting the need for positive media attention as a lever for necessary social change, our review suggests the present discourse overlooks an important factor that must be addressed.

Figure 1



Cycles of Economic Marginalization

A factor that is often missing from the discussion on the employment situation for persons with disabilities is the cycle of further marginalization they experience during times of economic volatility. Multiple studies have substantiated the claim that persons with

disabilities experience significantly greater negative impact on their employment due to periods of recession (Burkhauser et al., 2001; Fogg et al., 2010 and 2011; Kaye, 2010; Livermore & Honeycutt, 2015). Due to the growing sentiment that the present economic situation is the ideal time for persons with disabilities to re-enter the labor market, coupled with growing discussion of a pending recession; we sought to understand the role that previous economic events have played in labor market attachment of persons with disabilities. Our analysis included a comparison of the employment percentages and labor market activity rates of persons with and without disabilities over a time series of five-year periods following recessions that ended in 1982, 1991, 2001 and 2009 (Erickson et al., 2017). The employment percentage is the total number of non-institutionalized, male and female, persons with disabilities ages 16-64 who were employed compared to the total number of individuals within these categories. The labor market activity rate is the percentage of civilian, non-institutionalized, male and female, persons with disabilities ages 18-64 who worked more than 52 hours during the calendar year. During these periods, the U.S. economy would have been in periods of recovery, with expanding employment.

Based on our findings, from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2018, we observed that persons with disabilities were significantly more impacted than their nondisabled peers in terms of employment percentage and labor market activity rates. During each time series, the average decrease in employment rates for persons with disabilities was 9 percent compared to an average increase of 2 percent for persons without disabilities (see Figure 2). The average decrease in labor market activity rate for persons with disabilities was 11 percent following each economic event. By contrast, the average decrease experienced by persons without disabilities was just 1.25 percent (see Figure 3).

Figure 2

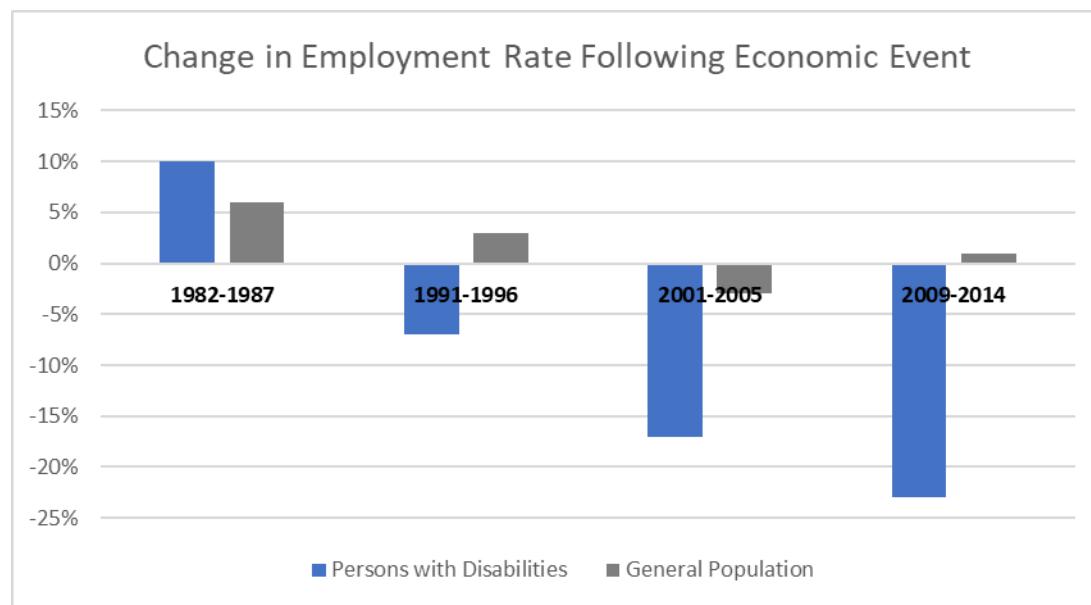
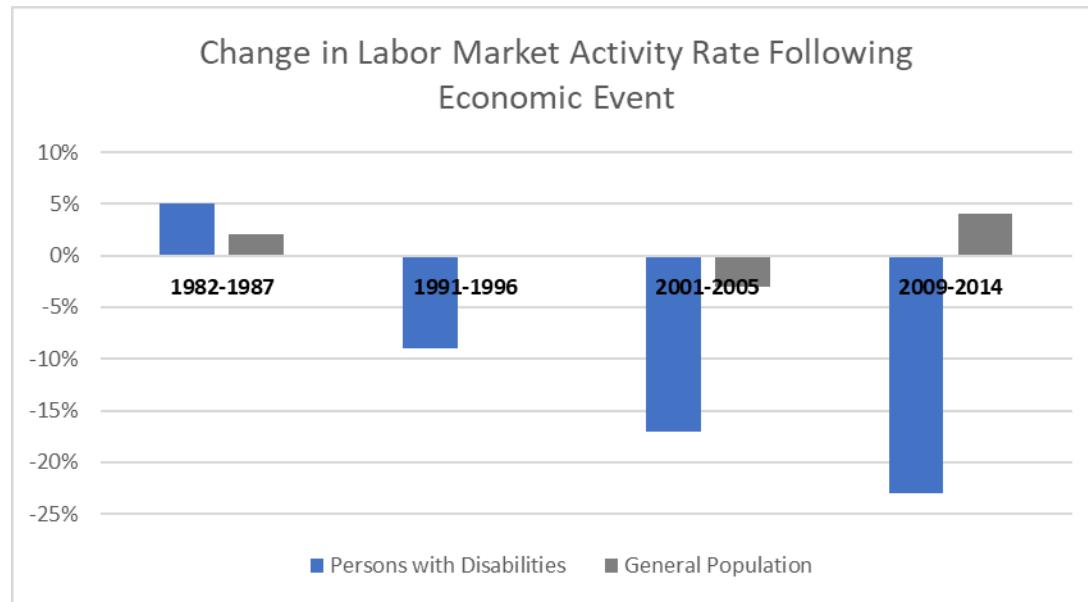


Figure 3



A Promising Intervention - Inclusive Postsecondary Education

Persons with disabilities are consistently underemployed (Sevak et al., 2018). In fact, in 2017, the employment rate for the disability community, inclusive of all prevalence types, was 36.4%, compared to 75% for those without disabilities. More specifically, the employment rate for individuals with IDD in 2017 was 27.2% (Erickson et al., 2017; Erickson et al., 2019). Therefore, creating access to postsecondary education through IPSE provides a pathway to employment for persons with IDD.

The role of employment within IPSE, along with the internships, training and tools, and progression of skills that come with an IPSE, create further opportunities for employment and to gain skills. The literature supports improved rates of employment for those who complete an IPSE program (Sheppard-Jones et al., 2018; Wehman et al., 2018).

In a recent review of data on IPSE programs that are funded as Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSIDs), Grigal and Papay (2018) state that the rate of employment while attending a TPSID program has dramatically risen from 27% to 43% within a six-year period. Most students do not have work experience prior to attending their IPSE (Grigal et al., 2018). Recognizing that working in a paid position during their university time is key to achieving a job post-graduation, there must be more emphasis with inclusive programs on setting up successful employment. Providing an experience within a line of work that is interesting to the individual with a disability rather than checking off a level of preconceived proficiencies becomes a powerful end goal. Employment options take on an even richer, more meaningful and pivotal experiential tool when best practices dictate the importance of finding paid positions (Grigal et al., 2018). In this manner, a primary purpose of each IPSE program is for students to gain skills with on-the-job training.

There are 282 IPSE programs in the United States according to the Coordinating Center of Think College (Think College, 2019). A primary component of these programs is to provide work skill development (HEOA, 2008) and work experiences to obtain integrated employment. Attendance in an IPSE has been identified to correlate with lower unemployment rates and higher earnings (Vilorio, 2016; Southward & Kyzar, 2017). In an analysis of data from the TPSID model demonstration programs, factors that were found to be significant predictors of gainful employment included students having paid jobs during the program and upon graduation (Grigal et al., 2018).

In Summary

There is an urgent and compelling need to couple existing positive social sentiment about the employment of persons with disabilities and the present discourse on the future of work. Doing so requires confronting the economic realities this population has experienced over history to break the vicious “last hired, first fired” paradigm. Real progress can only be achieved by addressing root causes of social identity and the low levels of economic and social value associated with persons with disabilities. We believe promising practices such as IPSE are a step in this direction. IPSE serves as a vehicle for developing relevant skills for the future labor market and a pathway to career opportunities. Most importantly, IPSE represents a step toward addressing disparities in access to education and barriers to economic and social mobility experienced by persons with disabilities. Our examination underscores the critical need for persons with disabilities to be fully included in the national dialogue on the future of work. It should not take unprecedented economic conditions for society to acknowledge the valuable contributions that persons with disabilities can offer. Instead, we should universally recognize that it is always the right time to hire the right person for the job.

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