

## Employers' Perspectives on Ohio's Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

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### Abstract

As postsecondary programs grow for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD), there is an increased focus on program evaluation and effectiveness, specifically related to employment outcomes. Researchers from Ohio's Statewide Consortium (OSC) conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 employer partners. Results indicate that OSC programs are providing high-quality work-based learning experiences for students with IDD aligned with relevant Think College Standards for Inclusive Higher Education (Think College, 2020). Key components of quality partnerships are highlighted as well as aspects of work-based

learning experiences critical to skill development for students with IDD. Practical applications for professionals are proposed as well.

*Keywords:* employers, intellectual and/or developmental disability, inclusive postsecondary programs, self-advocacy, work-based learning

### Plain Language Summary

- Many students with intellectual and developmental disabilities attend college programs to gain work skills and find jobs.
- To investigate partnerships between college programs and local employers that work with students, we wanted to find out what the employers thought about Ohio's college programs for students with disabilities.
- **What we did in this study:** We asked seventeen employers questions about what the programs are doing well and what we could do differently.
- **Findings:** The employers said that most of the things we are doing are working well and shared ideas to make things better.
  - They generally felt that the skills of the students they worked with improved with cooperation from the college programs.
  - Finally, they told stories of how students advocate, or speak up for themselves, on the job.
- **Conclusion:** Our findings show that improved partnership communication and additional education is needed for employers to become more confident in supporting students with disabilities depending on an individual's strengths and needs.

Gainful employment is an essential aspect of quality of life, as it promotes increased access to meaningful social relationships, and has been associated with positive health and well-being, community access, and independence (Chezan et al., 2018; Trembath et al., 2010). Additionally, when companies employ individuals from diverse backgrounds, such as those with disabilities, it is not only beneficial to the individual, but also the businesses and our communities. For example, when companies successfully employ individuals with disabilities, profits increase, customers and employees are more loyal, and business cultures shift to be more inclusive (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2012; Lindsay et al., 2019).

Despite the benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities (Scott et al., 2017) and the many federal and state systems designed to serve adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), a term that combines several categories of disability that commonly occur during a child's developmental period (e.g., intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy), obtaining and sustaining employment after high school remains elusive for this population (Siperstein et al., 2013). Researchers have reported that secondary students with IDD have lower employment outcomes than their peers from other disability categories (Baer et al., 2011) and only 19% of adults with IDD had a paid employment in the community (National Core Indicators, 2019). Underemployment also

plagues individuals with IDD due to issues such as limited hours, low pay, dissatisfaction with job duties, and limited opportunities for advancement (Meltzer et al, 2020). Thus, while competitive, community-integrated employment opportunities have increased in the past 20 years, the need to increase access to employment, support job retention, and promote both work and overall quality of life still exists.

The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA) created new pathways to employment for individuals with IDD by funding the development of inclusive postsecondary educational (PSE) opportunities. Currently, over 300 programs exist around the nation. Of these, nine are located in Ohio and are organized into Ohio's Statewide Consortia (OSC). Prior to HEOA, most students with IDD were denied access to PSE due to the misperception that they would not benefit from additional education and training to prepare for employment. Emerging research supports the significance of inclusive PSE programs on employment for students with IDD (Cimera et al., 2018; Grigal et al., 2021; Moore & Schelling, 2015). Cimera and colleagues (2018) examined vocational outcomes of more than 9000 transition-age (17-26 years old) students with IDD and reported that 70% of respondents who had some PSE were employed and had access to a wider range of occupations. Grigal and colleagues (2021) reported that one year after completion of a PSE program, 59% (n = 275) of respondents were employed. Of OSC graduates, 86% (n = 148) of respondents were employed in 2021 (Izzo et al., 2021).

HEOA also mandated the creation of a national coordinating center (Think College), awarded to the University of Massachusetts Boston, to facilitate high-quality, research-based inclusive experiences. In 2011, a team of 38 experts developed and validated the Think College Standards for Inclusive Higher Education (TCSIHE) with quality indicators and benchmarks (Grigal et al., 2012). The eight standards provide a framework to guide development and evaluation of emerging inclusive PSE programs (Grigal et al., 2011; Lynch & Getzel, 2013). In 2020, after an intensive review, Think College published a draft revision of the TCSIHE (Think College, 2020). The eight standards remained the same; however, they were re-numbered, and the quality indicators and benchmarks were revised. The standards include: 1) Alignment with College Systems and Practices; 2) Coordination and Collaboration; 3) Sustainability; 4) Evaluation; 5) Self-Determination; 6) Academic Access; 7) Career Development and Employment; and 8) Campus Membership (Think College, 2020).

Standard seven is perhaps one of the most essential standards because it specifically addresses career development and employment, a primary outcome of PSE programs for all students (Grigal et al., 2012; Papay & Bambara, 2011). Completing a PSE program is a predictor of paid employment for students with IDD (Moore & Schelling, 2015), and is closely related to their wages and the number of hours an individual works (Domin et al., 2020). As we continue to develop and enhance these PSE programs, we must gain employers' perspectives. Little research has been done to gather this data (Whirley et al., 2020). Recently, Scheef (2019) conducted a national survey regarding strategies to support employment for students with IDD. Seven strategies were frequently used by PSE program staff, including: feedback from employers; trusting relationships; negotiating job duties; onsite training; natural supports; and connecting coursework to employment experiences. Underutilized strategies also emerged: involving employers with the PSE

program; utilizing employer networks; and providing training to support employers in their ability to interact and work with students with IDD.

Across both the highly utilized and underutilized strategies described by Scheef (2019) is the need for close, collaborative partnerships between PSE program staff and employers. However, little data has been collected to capture employer perspectives on their experiences hiring students with IDD or partnering with PSE programs to support their employment (Riesen & Oertle, 2019; Whirley et al., 2020). Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the research question, how might employer perspectives inform PSE program evaluations using the relevant TCSIHE quality indicators?

## Method

### Research Design

This phenomenological qualitative research study was designed to explore how employer perspectives might inform OSC program evaluation. Phenomenological research aims to describe and understand a shared experience (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the phenomenon is the shared experiences of employers currently partnering with OSC programs. Based on the research question, researchers chose to conduct semi-structured interviews utilizing a virtual platform. Semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using a systematic and focused analysis (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020).

#### *Semi-structured Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were utilized to document employers' perspectives. This format provided researchers the opportunity to ask standardized questions with the flexibility to probe more deeply when needed to understand responses and create a more conversational dynamic during interviews (Harrell et al., 2009). Developing the standardized questions, researchers reviewed the TCSIHE to identify which were relevant to employer experiences. Questions were developed to capture demographic information from employers as well as two to three related questions for each relevant standard. An interview protocol was established and piloted with three employers for face validity. Finally, researchers refined the questions and protocol, resulting in 54 interview questions.

#### *Recruitment and Participants*

OSC staff contacted employers via email to invite them to participate in a virtual interview. Employers who self-selected to participate were then connected via email with the research team to schedule the interview. In this email, a consent form was attached along with the interview questions that were going to be asked. Seventeen different employers across OSC programs were interviewed. Nine interviews were conducted with University of Cincinnati (UC) employer partners, six with The Ohio State University (OSU) partners, and two with Columbus State Community College (CSCC) partners. Employers were from

a wide range of O\*NET job industry categories. Table 1 highlights demographics of employers interviewed.

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews between 30 and 60 minutes were conducted virtually using the Microsoft Teams platform. Interviews were audio recorded for transcriptions; however, employers turned their computer cameras off during recording. Recordings were transcribed, emailed to participants for member checking (Miles et al., 2018), organized by employer number and uploaded into MaxQDA, a qualitative data analysis tool, for analysis (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020).

### *Data Analysis*

Researchers reviewed the research question and read each transcript completely prior to coding. Initial thoughts and ideas were recorded in “free memos” in MaxQDA (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020). Transcripts were coded and analyzed in MaxQDA utilizing a systematic and focused approach (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020). Coding rules were established (e.g., coded segment does not need to be complete sentence). At least two researchers reviewed and coded each employer transcript. Responses to questions for each TCSIHE were reviewed, categorized by color-coding, and assigned basic codes. For example, any data related to standard two, career development, was color-coded red. Researchers compared color-coding and came to agreement on basic code definitions. These coded data were then reviewed again for fine codes, or more narrow subcategories, which were compared and defined by the research team to ensure intercoder agreement (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020). The final analysis resulted in the identification of emerging themes across all data categories (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020).

## **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore how employer perspectives might inform PSE program evaluations using the relevant TCSIHE quality indicators. Generally, employers were positively engaged with OSC programs and the students they serve. Interpretations from data analysis are provided in the next section. First, we summarize data from employers by each quality indicator for evaluative purposes. Second, we describe the emerging themes that resulted from the qualitative data analysis to address the important considerations for employers and OSC programs serving students with IDD.

### **Think College Standards for Inclusive Higher Education**

#### *TCSIHE 1: Alignment with College Systems and Practices*

According to TCSIHE 1.5A, PSE programs “should offer credentials which are relevant and meaningful to employers” (Think College, 2020, p. 3). Currently, all the OSC programs in this study offer credentials issued by their IHE and have had students earn various Industry Recognized Credentials (IRCs), including: i) Adult and Pediatric CPR; ii) First Aid Certificate; iii) Communicable Diseases; iv) Recognizing Child Abuse; v)

ServSafe Food Handler; vi) Educational Aide Certificate; vii) Information Technology Networking Certificate; and viii) Digital Media Certificate. Researchers asked employers what IRCs would make students with IDD more marketable as an employee in their organization. Interestingly, OSC employers indicated that having an IRC was not a primary concern when hiring students with IDD. Sixty-five percent of employers (n = 11) responded that there might be opportunities to develop a credential related to the skills needed, but noted that students having or acquiring the specific skills related to the employers' needs as more important than an IRC. Credentials that employers mentioned as useful were specific to the type of work and included: i) Adult and Pediatric CPR certificate; ii) American Association for Laboratory Animal Science; iii) Child Development Associate Credential; iv) First Aid Certificate; v) Lifeguard certification; vi) Newsroom Readiness Certificate; and Personal Training. Less than 25% (n = 4) of employers noted that their organization requires a degree for current full-time staff positions.

### *TCSIHE 2: Coordination and Collaboration*

TCSIHE 2.3A measures whether programs have “regular meetings and communications with external partners” (Think College, 2020, p. 6). All employers were satisfied with the communication with the PSE program and staffs' abilities to address concerns. Several employers mentioned the benefits of “check-ins” (both formal and informal) to ensure student success. Types and frequency of communication varied from daily to once a semester and included phone calls, emails, meetings, student evaluations, and an annual celebration luncheon. One employer mentioned the importance of proximity (i.e., employer is located on campus) to facilitate increased access to program staff and informal communication, enabling them to address concerns more expediently.

All the employers indicated that they knew who to communicate with and noted strong communication as important, especially for understanding program expectations. Many employers wanted more information about OSC programs related to expectations, outcomes, and updates on changes (e.g., staffing). A few employers expressed a need for additional updates when staffing transitions occur (e.g., staff leave, change, or retire).

### *TCSIHE 3: Sustainability*

TCSIHE 3.2B suggests that programs have “an advisory team or committee that advises program operations and actively supports sustainability” (Think College, 2020, p. 9). The majority of employers (59%; n = 10) were willing to participate on an advisory committee to support program operations and sustainability. Twenty-nine percent (n = 5) stated that they were unsure and would need clarity on frequency and expectations, and 12% (n = 2) stated that they would not be interested in participating on an advisory committee at this time.

### *TCSIHE 4: Evaluation*

TCSIHE 4.1A recommends “evaluation data from key stakeholders is collected on a regular basis” (Think College, 2020, p. 10). Data indicated that both formal and informal performance evaluation feedback is provided by employers to students regarding their

work-based learning (WBL) experiences, but it may or may not include OSC staff. Feedback may involve formal performance evaluations and/or informal conversations with students with IDD, program staff, or job coaches and/or natural supports. Seventy percent ( $n = 12$ ) of employers defined this as “regular” communication; 12% ( $n = 2$ ) indicated that they met 3 times per semester; 6% ( $n = 1$ ) indicated that they met once at the end of the semester; 6% ( $n = 1$ ) indicated that they met weekly; and 6% ( $n = 1$ ) indicated that they met monthly. Additionally, TCSIHE 4.1B recommends that data collected should be used to “identify and implement needed program changes” (Think College, 2020, p. 10). All employers were satisfied with OSC programs implementing suggested changes, although 24% ( $n = 4$ ) of employers stated “they have had no suggestions” for changes or improvements. All employers interviewed noted that the OSC program they partner with has done an excellent job of implementing any suggested changes they have made.

TCSIHE 4.1C states that programs should “disseminate data and evaluation findings to key stakeholders” (Think College, 2020, p. 11). Approximately half ( $n = 9$ ) of employers indicated that they do receive key information regarding programs via social media, email communications, and videos. Nearly 20% ( $n = 3$ ) mentioned attending graduation ceremonies for students and annual fundraisers. Finally, 12% ( $n = 2$ ) stated that they have not received communication regarding key findings, but attributed this to being a new partner.

#### *TCSIHE 5: Self-Determination*

TCSIHE 5.2B suggests that programs support students “to develop and use self-advocacy skills in employment settings” (Think College, 2020, p.13). All employers interviewed regarded self-advocacy as central to success and were able to articulate ways students have advocated for themselves. Seventy-one percent ( $n = 12$ ) reported that students with IDD were able to request accommodations, 50% ( $n = 10$ ) received constructive feedback appropriately, 47% ( $n = 8$ ) had disclosed their disability, and 35% ( $n = 6$ ) requested performance feedback.

#### *TCSIHE 7: Career Development & Employment*

TCSIHE 7.1A states “students participate in career awareness and exploration, work-based learning, and job-seeking experience related to student career interests with people without disabilities” (Think College, 2020, p.19). When asked about the ways they engage with students, 24% ( $n = 4$ ) stated that they have hosted job tryouts (i.e., students with IDD working alongside an experienced worker for an established short period). Thirty-five percent ( $n = 6$ ) stated that they have hosted job shadowing (i.e., students with IDD accompanying an experienced worker for part of a day to assess if it is a potential career pathway of interest), and all have hosted WBL experiences (i.e., paid or unpaid internships to develop work skills). Sixty-five percent ( $n = 11$ ) of the WBL experiences were unpaid internships and 54% ( $n = 9$ ) were paid internships. Only 18% ( $n = 3$ ) have hired graduates for paid employment. Employers who hosted unpaid internships indicated that they minimize those to no more than two semesters.

TCSIHE 7.2A recommends “students have access to job coaches and developers who receive ongoing training and supervision” (Think College, 2020, p.20). Most of the employers (82%;  $n = 14$ ) were familiar with job coaches and natural supports. Nearly all (88%;  $n = 15$ ) were satisfied with the performance of the job coaches or natural supports. A few ( $n = 3$ ) reported that they were able to act as a natural support and did not need a job coach. One employer who currently relied on natural supports stated that it would “be a better model to have a job coach.” Others commented on how well job coaches work with their employees to provide recommendations and guidance. One employer remarked that the job coaches are “fantastic” and “step in when students are struggling,” while another reflected on the varying strengths and skills of the job coaches. Employers also noted that more supports are usually provided at the beginning of an internship and then faded over time. Finally, one suggested that roles between employer and PSE program staff and job coaches could be more clearly defined.

TCSIHE 7.2B states, “students participate in paid work related to personal choice and career goals” (Think College, 2020, p. 21). Employers noted the importance of working with PSE staff and/or students prior to an internship to ensure that it is a good match in terms of skills, interests, goals, and desired environment. Examples of this include reviewing resumes, conducting interviews, participating in meetings, engaging in skills matching, and offering opportunities for job shadowing or job tryouts. All employers indicated that they do their best to ensure that WBL experiences are individually designed to match the students’ career goals and interests.

Employers indicated that they ensure students with IDD, once placed, understand their specific tasks and the importance of their roles in the organization. They mentioned providing accommodations and adjusting tasks as needed. Others meet with students at the beginning of the internship to discuss goals and ways the employer can assist. One employer reported that a student intern mentioned she wanted experience in public speaking because she had taken a communications course, so they provided an opportunity for her to speak to a small group of co-workers about the benefits she gained from her internship.

TSIHE 7.2C suggests PSE programs “collaborate with community-based employment agencies to support students to obtain and sustain employment both during the program and at program exit” (Think College, 2020, p. 21). All the OSC programs collaborate with Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD), Ohio’s state vocational rehabilitation agency, and/or Ohio’s Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD), as well as local educational agencies (LEAs) in varying capacities. Three OSC programs are OOD community resource providers, and one program has a contract directly with an Ohio school district to support the operation of the program. Of the 17 employers interviewed, only two have worked with both OOD and DODD, and one worked with OOD only. The rest of the employers do not currently work with these state agencies.

TCSIHE 7.2D states the PSE programs should “use outreach and ongoing communication with employers both on and off campus to assist students to obtain and sustain employment” (Think College, 2020, p. 21). In order to gauge the commitment of employers to continuing their partnership with OSC programs and students, we asked



employers to rate their: (a) likelihood of continuing their internships; (b) likelihood of hiring graduates; and (c) disability confidence (i.e. perceptions towards individuals with IDD). Eighty-two percent of employers were highly likely ( $n = 13$ ) or likely ( $n = 1$ ) to continue to host internships, while 18% ( $n = 3$ ) indicated that they were not likely to continue due to lack of upper management support, lack of available work due to COVID-19, or that available work required additional skills. Of the 17 employers interviewed, 82% indicated they were highly likely ( $n = 7$ ) or likely ( $n = 7$ ) to hire students who have graduated from a PSE program. Employers felt the OSC programs prepared graduates for professional work, and WBL experiences provided provisional opportunities for them to get to know students prior to hiring. Additionally, 18% ( $n = 3$ ) shared that they were not likely to hire graduates. Barriers to post-graduate employment included: lack of support and time; need to increase disability confidence; lack of available positions; and lack of credentials and prerequisites for existing positions.

### **Emerging Themes: Evaluating Employer Partnerships and Student Supports**

Employer perceptions indicate a high level of quality exhibited by OSC programs aligned with TCSIHE. Within the context of using these quality indicators for OSC program evaluation, several themes emerged from coding as important considerations for employers and PSE program staff. Employers shared some suggestions for improvements and identified barriers to hiring graduates of OSC programs. The following subheadings signify the resulting emerging themes across interviews from the data analysis process.

#### *OSC Programs Improving Employment Outcomes*

The foundation for successful WBL experiences is establishing a strong partnership between employers and PSE program staff (Riesen & Oertle, 2019). Results indicate that solid partnerships have been established between employers and OSC programs. Several factors were central to this. Regular communication was critical to relationship building and partnership development, which requires dual commitment from employers and OSC program staff. Communication occurs in a variety of ways, including email, phone, or face-to-face, and should be done in the manner the employer most prefers. The frequency of communication can vary from employer to employer; however, it could occur on a set schedule, as needs arise, or remain unscheduled while statuses seem to be stable and positive. Employers also mentioned that relationships with OSC programs are built over time and that consistent connection (i.e., being able to contact staff as needed) is important. Relationship-building occurred between employers and program staff, as well as between employers and students. Additionally, the significance of job matching was emphasized, as was the role of job coaches and designated natural supports. Job coaches bolster the partnership and are key to the growth and development of students and employer disability confidence. Finally, WBL experiences provide valuable opportunities for skill development, increasing self-determination for students with IDD.

**WBL and Hiring Practices.** The primary driver of OSC programs is to improve employment outcomes for students with IDD; therefore, facilitators and barriers for employers' hiring were important topics to explore. With a few exceptions, OSC

employers were committed to continuing their partnership and emphasized the value of the WBL experiences. One employer stated, “it increases your hireability because you’re already trained and ready to go.” Unfortunately, only three employers have hired graduates to date, a trend that needs further research. One employer recommended providing additional education, stating, “I would be willing to listen to a presentation to get more information about the program and how to better work with the students. I would like it once a semester.” Another employer wanted more information about the program so they could share with other potential partners.

**Job Matching Career Interests and Goals.** Person-centered planning is critical when working with students with IDD, which includes providing individualized supports and services that emphasize choice and match individuals’ preferences, interests, needs and skills. Interviews documented how employers work with OSC staff to ensure that WBL experiences align with students’ personal career interests and goals. One employer commented on how they asked students about what their goals and interests were and did their best to “tailor jobs towards this.” One mentioned how they “guide their duties and placements to where their talents are going to flourish.” The importance of job matching was also supported by job tryouts and job shadowing.

**Natural Supports and Job Coaches.** All employers indicated satisfaction with OSC program supports, including job coaches, but varied responses suggest that there is not a consistent “one size fits all” approach. We defined job coach as an individual who is hired to help students with IDD learn and perform their work tasks and who is a natural support as an experienced coworker who provides training and ongoing support for students with IDD to learn and perform their work tasks. Some employers indicated confidence in their ability to act as a natural support for students, as they “try to support my students, no matter if they have IDD or not.” Natural supports have more familiarity with tasks than job coaches; however, job coaches may have a greater understanding of the student’s existing skills, capacity to learn new skills, and modes for teaching those skills. Employers shared that they learned how to provide supports for students with IDD from the job coaches and then faded use of job coaches.

Some employers wanted more instruction on strategies for fading support. Others reported discovering the need for additional support once the student was on the job. They would have job coaches “come in on a regular basis to troubleshoot any issues or provide any extra support that might be needed.” In some cases, the need for additional support was associated with the student’s desire to gain the skills necessary to do a particular part of the job. Employers were willing to be flexible in accommodating these desires and in identifying resources for support. Despite lacking clarity on the definition of roles, employers were overall satisfied with job coaches and natural supports.

**Skill Development.** Employers stated that students with IDD became more independent in their work over time by initiating tasks or demonstrating more confidence in their abilities, thus requiring fewer supports. Often, employer responses to skill development questions were rooted in job coaching and natural supports. In each case, when employers noted the need for additional skills, they also discussed resources for

gaining those skills and the need for job coaches to support students. All employers acknowledged the importance of the PSE program staff for providing these resources.

**Performance Evaluations.** All employers interviewed indicated that they provide evaluations via performance feedback to students. Performance evaluation emerged as critical to students' skill development, growth, and goal attainment. PSE program staff, job coaches and/or natural supports also play a critical role in this progression; however, the inconsistencies in how often evaluations occur across OSC programs and employers, as well as the level of student participation, is something that OSC programs could explore and potentially address.

**Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination.** All employers shared rich stories with examples of how students demonstrated various components of self-advocacy in the workplace. For example, an employer noted that a student asked for a stand-up desk, facing in a different direction, so that she would not be distracted. Another employer gave the example of a worker who expressed discomfort working with a particular coworker, and the employer was able to accommodate the student's request to be in a different group. In another example, a student expressed the desire to be challenged more and try new tasks. Finally, one of the employers explained how a student had the opportunity to share his experiences and needs as a voter with a disability during his internship with a public radio network, emphasizing the need "for everyone's voice to be heard."

Self-regulation, a component of self-determination, also emerged as an area of growth. For example, students learned to stop checking cellphones while working. Several employers described how students transformed from being shy, nervous, or timid, to becoming more independent and self-confident in their work over time. Employers also noticed that students were able to persevere and meet challenges they faced. Lastly, one employer commented, "The student was always in the driver's seat, seamless, not intrusive."

Our data revealed two additional, significant results regarding self-advocacy and self-determination. First, not all employers were aware that students with IDD may have difficulty asking for help or accurately identifying their need for help; and second, workplace expectations for asking for help or accommodations are different than in academic settings.

**Impact of COVID-19.** Employer interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic when the virus impacted nearly every country in the world. Due to COVID-19, many restrictions were put in place to ensure that only essential workers were in the workplace, to maintain physical distance to stop the spread of the virus. COVID-19 awareness and adherence to policies were emphasized by employers. Thankfully, 76% (n = 13) of the employers interviewed were able to continue hosting their WBL experiences by integrating COVID-19 related adaptations. Four of the employers interviewed were not able to host any WBL experiences during the 2020-2021 academic year. Along with this, many of the employers had fewer interns, or their interns were working virtually. Furthermore, since most employers were working remotely, "being in the same space" became a challenge, and it was difficult for certain tasks to be

accomplished due to the distance. For student interns, these tasks could be accomplished in the past with a job coach; however, the role of many job coaches had to be restructured (e.g. virtual vs. in-person support) due to COVID-19.

### Discussion

OSC programs have established solid partnerships with the majority of employers interviewed. Trusting relationships are necessary to sustain these partnerships, which take time and commitment to build on the part of OSC program staff and the employers. Employers' responses support research that indicates WBL experiences facilitate post-graduation employment (Grigal et al., 2019; Ju et al., 2013). Ultimately, programs should have a mechanism for evaluating the quality of WBL activities and practices. This study has implemented the TCSIHE quality indicators as an approach to investigate employer partnerships with OSC programs with an aim to inform future evaluation practices.

Employers indicated various barriers to offering future employment, including the level of employer support for the partnerships and students with IDD during their WBL experience. These findings demonstrate that a lack of support for the students with IDD, job coaches, and supervisors may harm the learning experiences of the students or decrease long-term hiring. On the other hand, a high level of support from employers in the workplace climate can enhance student experiences and chance of employment.

One way several universities have increased the hiring of program graduates is creating job-carved positions. This involves customizing a job description by pulling job tasks that a student with IDD successfully completes and/or reduces the number of hours of the position. The job-carved position description has allowed hiring managers to hire graduates who may not be able to do all the tasks for a given position or work full time (Ho, 2018).

The literature substantiates our findings surrounding support, or lack thereof, for inclusive workplaces (Bezyak et al., 2021; Scheef et al., 2018), indicating the need to address employers' disability confidence. To this point, one employer noted that while she was enthusiastic about the partnership, many of her colleagues did not share her perspective:

One of my challenges was getting other people on board with the program. I didn't feel like I had the support. People don't realize what the program is about, and what good the program does for the students. It can make a life change for these students, and not everyone saw that.

Lindsey and colleagues (2019) described four phases of disability confidence ranging from disability discomfort to disability confidence. Employers in the disability confidence phase lead and model a workplace culture that is both inclusive and supportive of disability diversity (Lindsey et al., 2019). Results from this study highlight the potential need to disseminate more information to increase awareness and help employers recognize the value and positive impact their partnership can have for students with IDD and their businesses. As a society, we are on the cusp of shifting employers' perspectives

of hiring students with IDD who were once considered unemployable. Capturing the real obstacles and shedding previous misconceptions and potential worries is critical.

Education within employer organizations can come in a variety of ways. Disability:IN is a national organization, with state chapters, dedicated to peer-to-peer empowerment within businesses supporting disability inclusion. In many states, vocational rehabilitation agencies have business relations teams focused on cultivating inclusive workplaces through resources, technical assistance, and disability awareness and acceptance. Increasing education for employers may also encourage the development of new pathways to employment through PSE programs.

Another opportunity for growth, specifically for OSC programs, would be to continue to develop broader pathways from WBL experiences to increase post-graduation employment. Employers may not have the capacity to support both WBL experiences and post-graduation employees, creating a paradox where employers must choose between continuing to offer valuable WBL experiences or hiring graduates. OSC programs need to develop partnerships with employers who can accept a pipeline of students interns with IDD who are then immediately hired post-graduation. One option would be collaborating with large corporations that have many opportunities on a rotating basis, such as Nationwide Insurance, JP Morgan Chase, and Aramark.

Interviews with employers indicated a desire for catering WBL experiences with the interests of students with IDD to better prepare them for their specific career goals and emphasize their strengths. These results support conscientious planning when matching students with IDD with their WBL opportunity, in addition to the need for continuous conversation between supervisors and students in the workplace for a more tailored experience. Making a job match can be difficult and certainly takes time. To aid in the process, practitioners can utilize the tools such as Career Discovery Process (Ohio Employment First, 2015), Charting the Life Course (Missouri Family to Family, 2015), and the Vocational Fit Assessment (Persch et al., 2015), many of which are free. Ohio has also created a series of Provider Support Training (n.d.) videos to aid in the job development process which can be found on Ohio's Employment First website. Improving person-centered planning with the presence of natural supports and job coaches is another way to facilitate a beneficial experience for the student and their skill development.

Employers identified various roles that highlight the importance of expertise from a natural support in job-specific training complemented by the student-specific knowledge of the job coaches. Program staff can utilize existing natural supports to encourage and work with other employees to become natural supports as well. Job coaches are not only available to the student, but they can also be available to help coach and train the existing employees to become natural supports. This can allow for a job coach to fade in and out of the setting, potentially creating a more natural work environment for all and greater student autonomy. However, the relationships between natural supports, job coaches, and students with IDD indicate a need for further training for employers. Several interviewees confirmed a need for further education on student supports, aligning with Scheef's (2019) findings that conclude that PSE programs are underutilizing training

opportunities to support employers in their ability to interact and work with students with IDD.

The Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN; n.d.) can provide resources for employers wanting to strengthen inclusive workplaces. EARN can provide resources for recruiting, hiring, retaining, and advancing employees with disabilities. Another way to support employers who want to know a bit more about a student from the outset of the WBL experience is to create a one-pager about student strengths and areas in which support may be needed. One tool that can be used to determine the roles of program staff, employer staff, and student is using a worksite agreement. This document would outline the specific details of each party's duties and roles.

### **Future Research**

More work needs to be done to understand this complex relationship between the employers' assessments of the potential and capabilities of students with IDD and the other important dimensions of self-advocacy in the workplace. Employers regarded self-advocacy as a positive sign of employees taking responsibility for their success at work. Our data suggests that students' expressions of self-advocacy contributed to the employers' appreciation of their value as employees. When students first begin a WBL experience, it can be helpful for employers or coaching staff to explicitly point out how and when a student should be asking for help to minimize the difficulty. Fostering a work environment in which asking for help is encouraged will help both students and staff feel more comfortable. One way for students to become more successful with advocating is to provide them with opportunities to utilize these skills. This could be in real-life situations that are low stakes, in contrived situations, or by providing opportunities for students to role-play.

Another area for researchers to further investigate is how employer staff (i.e., natural supports) and PSE program staff (i.e., job coaches) influence skill development of students with IDD by identifying evidence-based supports being provided, and to what degree of fidelity they are being implemented. Inadequate resources (i.e., training and support) for this purpose have been documented in the literature (Scheef et al., 2018). Several employers in this study mention feeling uncomfortable implementing supports and/or having knowledge of skills to do so prior to the start of the WBL experience.

### **Limitations**

The following limitations should be considered when drawing conclusions from the OSC employer interviews. First, only the perspectives of 17 employers partnering with three college programs in Ohio were analyzed. Second, employer responses are from only one individual's perspective and experiences and may not reflect the entire workforce culture. Lastly, employers varied in the length of time they had partnered with OSC programs and were in the middle of a pandemic when interviewed.

### Conclusion

Low employment rates continue to persist for people with IDD (Butterworth & Migliore, 2015). Knowing and addressing the facilitators and barriers to accessing meaningful employment is imperative (Ju et al., 2013). As PSE programs for students with IDD continue to grow and improve employment outcomes, increased focus on program evaluation is critical. Results indicate that OSC programs are providing high-quality positive experiences that align with TCSIHE. Strong partnerships have been built between OSC programs and employers. The WBL experiences developed through these partnerships are critical to student growth. Key facilitators for this include regular communication, trusting relationships, job matching, supports provided by job coaches and natural supports, and performance evaluations which promote skill development including self-advocacy. Barriers to post-graduation employment included: lack of support and time; need to increase disability confidence of employer staff; lack of available positions; and current credentialing requirements and prerequisites for existing positions. The results of this study will help OSC and other PSE programs continue to provide and improve employment outcomes for students with IDD.

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**Table 1***Employer Demographics*

Question	Characteristic	<i>n</i> (%)
Industry category	Affiliated with Institute of Higher Education (IHE); Non-profit	5 (29)
	Health care	4 (24)
	Arts, entertainment, and recreation; Educational services	3 (18)
	Social assistance	2 (12)
	Administrative and support services; Construction; Finance and insurance; Professional, scientific technical; Public services	1 (6)
	Employer size	0-50
	51-200	9 (53)
	201-500	1 (6)
	501+	1 (6)
Interviewee role	Supervisory capacity	10 (38)
	Hiring authority	6 (23)
	Employee	3 (11)
	Natural support	2 (8)
	Other	5 (19)
Time partnered with	< 1 year	4 (24)

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PSE program	1-4 years	6 (35)
	5+ years	7 (41)
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Number of students	< 5 students	9 (52)
with IDD employer	6-10 students	4 (24)
has supported	10+ students	4 (24)
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Types of experience	Unpaid internship	10 (30)
for Students with	Paid internship	8 (24)
IDD <sup>a</sup>	Job shadowing	7 (21)
	Job tryout	5 (15)
	Permanent paid position for graduate	2 (6)
	Other	1 (3)

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