IntroductIon

The transition from adolescence to adulthood can include employment, postsecondary education, or both. For youth with disabilities, this period can also include transitioning from receiving services and supports from their school district or another youth-oriented service agency to adult services providers such as state vocational rehabilitation (VR) and intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) agencies. The outcomes targeted by these agencies may depend upon a number of factors, including the goals of the youth being supported, local resources, and these professionals’ expectations for these youth (Thacker & Sheppard-Jones, 2011). This brief highlights some recent findings on the impact of postsecondary education on employment outcomes and how this impact differs by disability status, using data from the 2010 American Community Survey (ACS).

The American Community Survey

The ACS is a national survey used by the U.S. Census Bureau to better understand changing communities. It reflects information above and beyond that gathered by the decennial census from all 50 states and the District of Columbia on topics such as disability, education, and employment, as well as other demographic and personal data (www.census.gov/acs/www/).

In this brief, we focus on people with any disability, people with no disability, people with cognitive disability, and people with cognitive disability with Supplemental Security Income (SSI) as defined by the ACS. Descriptions of these groups are provided herein.

• Any Disability - People included in this group are those who responded “yes” to at least one of the six disability questions on the ACS. Specifically, these questions ask about hearing impairment, visual impairment, physical disability, self-care disability, “go outside the home” disability, and cognitive disability.

• No Disability - People included in this group are those who did not respond “yes” to any of the six disability questions on the ACS.

• Cognitive Disability - People included in this group are those who responded “yes” to a question asking if, because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition lasting six months or more, they have difficulty learning, remembering, and concentrating. This group may include people with intellectual/developmental disability, traumatic brain injury, or dementia. Individuals who responded “yes” to this question are also included in the “any disability” category.

• Cognitive Disability with SSI – This is a subset of all people with a cognitive disability. It includes all people who responded “yes” to the cognitive disability item on the survey and reported receiving SSI in 2010.

Findings From the ACS

Postsecondary enrollment of transition-age youth

Transition-age youth with disabilities, including cognitive disabilities, access postsecondary education at lower rates than their peers without disabilities (see Figure 1). This finding is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009).
Transition-age youth and employment concurrent with postsecondary enrollment

For many students, postsecondary education is a full-time occupation; they forego employment while enrolled. Some 11 million undergraduate students attended institutions of higher education full-time in fall 2010, while 7 million attended part-time (NCES, 2012). Recent high school graduates not enrolled in college in fall 2011 were more likely than enrolled graduates to be in the labor force (68.7% compared with 38.8%) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Given the lower likelihood of employment among youth enrolled in postsecondary education, in the ACS data we would expect the employment rate for enrolled youth to be lower than for youth who are not enrolled across disability categories.

This pattern was evident for youth without disabilities (see Figure 2): —youth without disabilities who were not enrolled in postsecondary education had a higher employment rate than those who were enrolled. However, the inverse was true for youth with any disability or a cognitive disability:

Chi-square tests were conducted for each disability subpopulation to determine if there was a statistical relationship between postsecondary enrollment and
The correlation between employment and enrollment in postsecondary education was statistically significant (p<0.001) for all groups. This finding merits further exploration of the relationship between postsecondary enrollment and employment to determine its directionality and causality.

While it is promising to see a positive relationship between enrollment in postsecondary education and employment for youth with any disability or a cognitive disability, it should be noted that the postsecondary enrollment question on the ACS asks only whether or not an individual is enrolled and at which level (undergraduate or graduate school). The ACS does not provide any more detailed information about the student’s postsecondary experience, such as whether the student is enrolled full-time or part-time or whether the student’s goal is a degree or a certificate. While the data in Figure 2 suggest that postsecondary education has an impact on employment for youth with disabilities, having more information about the postsecondary experiences of youth with disabilities would help researchers and disability services professionals better understand which elements of postsecondary education (e.g., full-time versus part-time enrollment) affect employment outcomes.

**Employment outcomes for transition-age youth by educational attainment**

Population subgroups with higher educational attainment have higher employment rates. As shown in Figure 3, for people without a disability, with any disability, and with a cognitive disability, we see higher employment rates from one educational attainment category to the next. There are some exceptions—e.g., people without a disability with primary school as their highest attainment are employed at higher rates than people with some secondary education or a GED or alternative credential. Overall, though, the bottom line is that people with more education are employed at higher rates.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

These findings from the ACS, that higher educational attainment is associated with higher employment rates for students with any disability or a cognitive disability, mirror findings from previous studies looking at other datasets such as the RSA 911 Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) data and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (Migliore et al., 2009; Newman et al., 2011). Other studies have also found that individuals who take college courses but do not graduate from college have better employment outcomes than those without any postsecondary education (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003; Marcotte, Bailey, Borkoski, & Kienzl, 2005). Moreover, the positive relationship between concurrent postsecondary enrollment and employment for some disability subpopulations further supports the utility of postsecondary education in terms of promoting employment outcomes. Such findings suggest that Community Rehabilitation Providers, VR counselors, and transition coordinators should consider postsecondary education as they develop individual service plans for their clients.

**Figure 3. Employment rate by educational attainment for those not enrolled in any sort of schooling.**
These findings suggest that creating or supporting programs that increase access to postsecondary education for people with disabilities, including those with cognitive disabilities, could have a positive impact on longer-term employment and economic outcomes for these individuals. This increased access to postsecondary education could then result in more working individuals with disabilities contributing to payroll taxes and fewer people with disabilities participating in poverty prevention programs such as SSI, thus making such programs more cost-effective in the long term.

These findings also reflect the need for further research. While these data establish correlation between employment and education for people with disabilities, they do not establish causation or provide insights into the mechanisms linking these two factors. Researchers should continue to explore how postsecondary enrollment is related to concurrent and subsequent employment outcomes for disability subpopulations and the implications of those linkages for policy and service provision.

REFERENCES


