

Helping Young Adults with Disabilities Succeed in Early Adulthood | CEHS

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Dr. Kathleen Marie Oertle, an assistant professor in the Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling department of the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services at Utah State University, was awarded a \$600,000 grant for her latest project, called “Collaborate for Change.”

When young adults with disabilities leave high school, they transition from special education supports through their school to state resources, such as vocational rehabilitation counseling. Collaboration between these services is required by federal law, but because guidelines for collaboration are not specific, professionals on both sides have difficulty collaborating effectively. As a result, many young people with disabilities fall out of the system or do not have their needs met as they enter emerging adulthood.

Dr. Oertle and her colleagues seek to bridge the gap between these services. The main goal of “Collaborate for Change” is to improve outcomes for young adults with disabilities by clearly defining collaboration standards for the professionals who support them.

“This project gives us an opportunity to try to make a difference in a real way,” said Oertle. She explained that with the current system, many services are duplicated or overlooked, leading to unemployment, underemployment, or low community engagement.

Effective collaboration can help young adults transition from the support they had in high school to other resources while keeping a clear focus on their individual goals and values.

“It’s important to care for young adults with disabilities,” said Oertle, “but we also want to value them and help them reach their potential.”

Dr. Oertle and her colleagues are taking cues from research in other fields, such as business and public health, to find methods to establish collaboration among professionals with differing backgrounds. “Collaboration is everything,” Oertle said. “Social skills for work, self-advocacy, and workplace learning are more likely to improve quality of life for these young adults when collaboration is part of the process.”

The key, she says, is to ensure that collaboration is meaningful and outcome-based. “We’re not just checking boxes,” she said. “We want the plans for these kids to be alive and real.”

Collaborate for Change supports collaboration activities shared by special educators and rehabilitation counselors so resources can be provided to young people who are moving through transition services. Dr. Oertle and her colleagues are collaborating with statewide transition leaders in special education and rehabilitation counseling from 21 U.S. states, federal districts, and/or the major territories.

Such participation is vital to the longevity of the project, as statewide leaders influence the focus of the project and will be the early adopters of new practices. “The long-term outcome will be bigger than you and I can even imagine, not because of our work, but because of what statewide leaders will do with it,” said Oertle.

Collaborate for Change is funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Of the one hundred thirty-four proposals reviewed, Collaborate for Change was one of five field-initiated development projects awarded funding.

Dr. Oertle is collaborating on this 3-year project, which began in October 2019, with Dr. Caren Sax, along with Dr. Nan Hampton, Ms. Sheryl Bobroff, and Mr. Henry Cohn-Geltner of San Diego State University in partnership with the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education. To learn more about Drs. Oertle’s and Sax’s grant, view the [project summary](#).