

USU Special Education Researchers Awarded \$5.4M for Pilot Program with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation

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A student with disabilities is navigating the new "Map My Transition" website.

Utah State University researchers Brian Phillips, associate professor in the department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling, and Tim Riesen, research associate professor and director of research and training in the Institute for Disability Research, Policy, and Practice, which is housed in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, were recently awarded a \$5.4M contract as part of a \$14M Rehabilitation Services Administration, Pathways to Partnerships, Disability Innovation Fund (DIF) grant awarded to the Colorado Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. The DIF grant will expand access to transition services for youth and young adults with disabilities and will enhance partnerships among vocational rehabilitation, centers for independent living, state and local education agencies, and local community rehabilitation partners over the span of five years. Phillips and Riesen will work with several partners including Penn State University, Northern Colorado University, and several disability state agencies in Colorado throughout the five-year project.

The project will use participatory systems mapping to develop an interactive website called "Map My Transition" for parents and youth with disabilities. In addition to providing interactive tools, videos, and resources, the website will showcase service providers by allowing the network to connect parents and youth to support systems and service providers and will transition programming

specific to their local region. According to the Colorado Department of Education in 2022, a school exit data suggests that only 31 percent of former students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), 20percent of former students with intellectual and multiple disabilities (ID/MD), and 14 percent of former students with other disabilities obtained competitive integrated employment after exiting school.

When youth with disabilities are in the K-12 education system, they are provided with a range of school and related services. However, when youth exit school, services can be fragmented and hard to access for those not familiar with adult service systems. The adult services system requires a more savvy approach to finding and coordinating services for young adults. This website will be a one-stop opportunity to access the correct services for their needs.

"USU's role in the grant is the creation of the content for the 'Map My Transition' website. Our hope is to provide a site where parents and youth with disabilities will have transparency into specific services and videos that will assist them to prepare for their post-secondary education plans, whether that is education through a university or a work setting or both," says Phillips. "There is a lot of provider turnover in programs for individuals with disabilities. Creating a turnover-resistant is the shared goal of this grant."

One challenge for parents is that they often don't have the time to research which services are best for their child with a disability. Youth need access to services that are presented in an easy, self-guided model. The website will have a login page and will then bring up a pop-up screen that addresses which types of services the individual needs for their specific disability. Options will appear on the screen, covering topics such as documentation, registration, communication tools, transportation, and other administrative needs.

"Map My Transition" will help parents and youth know where to start to access services close to home. The website will map the nearby services for either work-related providers or educational opportunities. Rural and urban needs will also be accommodated based on geographical providers. The software will give parents and youth access to better outcomes for success.



Dr. Brian Phillips



Dr. Tim Riesen

"This participatory systems mapping will allow us to learn from agencies, partners, and communities to identify resources and supports to facilitate transition to employment. This information will be embedded into the web page so students and parents can have targeted information about adult services and supports in their local communities," adds Riesen.

The students targeted to use this mapping system are typically youth who have participated in special education programs while in the K-12 system. Phillips explains, "Youth ages 14 – 21 are the desired age group for Map My Transition. Many parents wonder what's next in the journey of adulthood. The grant focuses on competitive integrated employment. This pathway can be post-secondary education or employment."

Research shows that youth and young adults with disabilities who are marginalized face a range of obstacles when transitioning from school to adulthood. The intent

of the mapping system is to provide an equitable platform for parents and youth to learn about adult services and supports. The grant focuses on equity by allowing those individuals who have been marginalized to have improved access to services for more successful outcomes.

"It's important to highlight that there is a need to expand access to information about transition and adult services because employment outcomes for people with disabilities over the past 20 to 30 years are poor and they are not shifting," says Riesen. "By highlighting interventions and strategies that are evidence-based, parents and students will have information about what supports and interventions will facilitate transition to employment."

The goal for the mapping website is to prepare youth with disabilities for pre-employment transition tools on self-advocacy. This would teach someone with a disability, for example, how to communicate their needs with a professor or an employer. The map will also help parents and their children consider options for their desired post-secondary education pathway. If students feel confident and prepared for a college campus, their experience will be more positive.

Phillips concludes, "For Tim and me, this is very personal to both of us. I have two brothers with Down's Syndrome. My mother wanted to be involved, but she was trying to navigate a broken system. If we can be successful in five years with parents and youth telling us that the website was easy and intuitive, that will be significant—a huge impact. I don't know of any parents who are saying this in any state in the nation right now. We hope that Colorado initiates a place where parents can understand and know where their children can receive resources, and they can feel confident that providers are able to provide services."

"Map My Transition" is slated to launch in early 2024. For more information on the program, visit dvr.colorado.gov