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$2.5 million grant allows University of Richmond, Commonwealth partners to research return on investment of vocational rehabilitation programs

RICHMOND - Governor Terry McAuliffe today announced a nearly $2.5 million federal grant to the University of Richmond and its partners, including the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services, the Virginia Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired, and the University of Virginia Department of Economics, to assess the effectiveness of vocational rehabilitation programs for people with disabilities.
The funding will allow the team to investigate return on investment to vocational rehabilitation programs in several states in which agencies provide a wide range of services to help individuals with disabilities prepare for and engage in gainful employment. DARS, a major partner in the grant, will assist in the acquisition of data needed for the research and will work with other project partners to develop training materials for state vocational rehabilitation agencies.

The new grant and research will develop and test a user-friendly, web-based “Return on Investment Estimator” that will allow state agencies to simulate the impact of different vocational rehabilitation services on the employment outcomes of clients.

“This truly collaborative project is bearing fruit as we look at the return on investment of this publicly funded program at the state level,” said Governor McAuliffe. “Just as the New Virginia Economy Workforce Initiative is helping to ensure that more Virginians have the skills they need to succeed in our Commonwealth’s changing economy, this research is demonstrating evidence-based approaches to help people with disabilities enter the workforce. It is a valuable tool as we work to build a new Virginia economy.”

Dr. Robert Schmidt, professor and chair of the University of Richmond Economics Department in the Robins School of Business, is the principal investigator on the $2,498,878 five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research. He has taught at the University of Richmond since 1981 and has earned the University’s Distinguished Educator Award. The university is providing $25,000, or 1 percent, of the total project costs.

“Return on investment information for the state-federal vocational rehabilitation program is increasingly seen as an effective way to evaluate and articulate the effectiveness of vocational rehabilitation programs. We are pleased to be able to help develop this tool,” said Dr. Schmidt.

“The university is excited to begin this new phase of our partnership with the Commonwealth and our colleagues at UVA,” said University of Richmond President Ed Ayers. “The work of this partnership has already yielded important information, and this new grant will help ensure that these programs provide the best possible service and outcomes for the individuals they serve.”

The funding will support the collaboration among UR, DARS and partners at the University of Virginia Department of Economics; the George Washington University Center for Rehabilitation Counseling Research and Education; and state agencies overseeing vocational rehabilitation programs in Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Oklahoma and Texas.

Schmidt and his colleague, the late Dr. David Dean, a University of Richmond professor of economics, who led earlier research that resulted in the current award, have collaborated with colleagues at DARS for more than 20 years on studies of long-term employment outcomes for vocational rehabilitation clients.

DARS Commissioner Jim Rothrock will chair the project’s advisory group.
The partnership has already found that the Commonwealth’s Postsecondary Education Rehabilitation Transition program, supported by the Virginia Department of Education and administered by DARS at its Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center in Fishersville, results in participants earning twice as much in their first 10 years in the workforce than if they had not taken part in PERT.

“This gives these young adults stronger footing as they enter the workforce and boosts their earning potential, putting them on the path to success,” Rothrock said.

“This collaboration has clearly identified the value of our vocational rehabilitation program with data confirming the long-term return on investment of our funds,” said Dr. Bill Hazel, Secretary of Health and Human Resources.

The National Council on Rehabilitation Education recently awarded DARS its annual President’s Award for Excellence in Vocational Rehabilitation for outstanding work on return on investment in vocational rehabilitation.

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