

CRP BRIEF



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Issues and Trends in
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Why Diversity Matters to Community Rehabilitation Programs

The Rehabilitation Research Initiative (RRI) at the University of Texas Pan American (UTPA) is funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration to conduct research and training on capacity building for community rehabilitation programs (CRPs). This report discusses some of the barriers to employment for people with disabilities from diverse backgrounds and provides some resources for CRPs to enhance their multicultural competencies. Joan Mueller Reed, the author of this Brief, is the Project Coordinator at the RRI and Tom Shefcik is the Project Director.

BACKGROUND

Defining “Diversity”

The word, “diversity,” means different things in different contexts. In some cases, it is used to refer to classes protected by law, namely race, gender, and disability. This definition of the word gained popularity during the 1990’s and continues to be used by state and federal programs. A broader definition of “diversity” is emerging, one that includes other attributes such as age, educational level, family structure, job function, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and values. This more inclusive meaning of “diversity” focuses on the varied perspectives and unique contributions of people from all types of backgrounds.

Our Nation’s Racial and Ethnic Diversity

The racial and ethnic profile of America is changing. In the past decade there has been tremendous growth of the Hispanic, Asian, and multiracial populations (Census 2000). According to Lindsay & Singer (2003) of the Brookings Institute, an important factor behind these growth trends is immigration. From 1970 to 2000, nearly 21 million immigrants arrived legally in the United States, the biggest influx since the classic era of immigration from 1880 to 1930.

These two periods of immigration are vastly different in terms of race and ethnicity. Whereas a

century ago the majority of immigrants came from Europe, today’s immigrants are mostly Hispanic and Asian. Fifty percent (50%) of our recent immigrants came from Latin America, with Mexico as the largest source country. A century ago, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 deliberately sought to keep Asians off U.S. soil. This shameful example of racist legislation was eliminated by the Immigration Act of 1965, and today 34% of recent immigrants are Asian. The remaining 16% of the immigrant population are from Europe and Africa.

Section 21 of the Rehabilitation Act

Unfortunately, disabling conditions seem to strike ethnic and racial minority groups at a disproportionately high rate. For instance, African Americans are one and one half times more likely to be disabled than whites and twice as likely to be severely disabled. In Section 21 of the 1992 Rehabilitation Act Amendments, Congress concluded that “patterns of inequitable treatment of minorities have been documented in all major junctures of the vocational rehabilitation process.” These patterns include lower participation rates and higher rates of unsuccessful case closures for minority individuals. “Minorities are provided less training than their white counterparts. Consistently, less money is spent on minorities than their white counterparts” (Section 21).

The Rehabilitation Research Initiative: Capacity Building for CRP's

Section 21 is the authorizing legislation for a variety of capacity building projects funded under the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). The Rehabilitation Research Initiative, funded initially in Fall 2002, is the first such project to focus on capacity building for community rehabilitation programs (CRP's). RRI is a partnership between the Department of Rehabilitation at The University of Texas-Pan American and the Department of Rehabilitation, Social Work, and Addictions at the University of North Texas.

The overall goal of RRI is to increase the capacity of CRP's to serve individuals with disabilities from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Three primary objectives guide the project's work: (1) identify barriers to access by conducting research, (2) identify new and innovative strategies to circumventing these barriers, and (3) disseminate the results of this research to a national audience.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSUMERS

Barriers Identified

In order to identify barriers to CRP access for consumers of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, RRI has conducted several types of research including a literature review, focus groups, and telephone interviews. Preliminary results of this research indicate numerous barriers, the majority of which fall into the following seven categories: transportation, language, technology, cultural mistrust, lack of knowledge of the rehabilitation process, low expectations of job placement, and differing concepts of time.

Census data shows that both disability and poverty strike minority groups more frequently than they do the white majority population. This means people with disabilities referred to CRP's for employment-related services are more likely to be low-income and non-white. Considering that the minority population is increasing at a faster rate than the white population, and that federal funding for

vocational services tends to focus on areas of greatest need, it is clear that CRP's will need to develop the capacity to provide culturally relevant services to consumers from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

RELEVANCE FOR CRP'S

Knowing the Community

Community-based rehabilitation programs are, by definition, linked to the communities they serve. According to the Census 2000 American Community Survey, the growth of minority populations (especially Hispanic and Asian groups) has been more rapid in certain states, and less dramatic in others. For instance, 75% of Hispanic individuals live in only seven states: California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Arizona, and New Jersey. 50% of these live in only two states: California and Texas. As for Asian-Americans, 60% live in only five states: California, New York, Texas, Hawaii, and New Jersey. Thirty-five percent (35%) of these live in California alone.

It is worth noting that the Census does not show the geographical distribution of undocumented workers. According to the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (2003), there are some 7 million illegal immigrants currently working in the US.

Since our nation's communities are demographically different from each other, it stands to reason that cultural competency needs might also vary from community to community and region to region. For instance, a CRP located in a West Coast urban community may serve a sizeable Asian population with representation from a variety of national origins, while another program located in a rural Midwestern community may be predominantly white with a growing Mexican-American population. The cultural competency skills needed by staff in each CRP would vary to some degree, in order to best serve the needs of the consumers in a given community.

Diversity Training for CRP's

A number of research subjects suggested diversity training as a strategy for helping minority

consumers with disabilities overcome barriers to accessing CRP services. This training should both enhance an awareness and appreciation in CRP personnel of the range of differences among people, and help service providers to know what resources are available in their communities. According to Thomas and Ely (1996) in their Harvard Business Review article, "Making Differences Matter," it is important for organizations to move beyond a strict focus on discrimination and access in diversity training. They recommend incorporating the broad, inclusive definition of "diversity" described in the first paragraph of this article, where diversity is viewed as a resource to be cultivated. With this approach, diversity training incorporates team-building, and is seen as a way of improving the way a CRP's services are provided.

Generic diversity training may not address the specific needs of CRP staff and consumers. What is needed is an approach tailored to CRP's and the unique challenges they face, such as:

- Training culturally competent CRP staff, regardless of their racial or ethnic background;
- Hiring, training, and promoting CRP staff from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds; and
- Dealing with issues or conflicts arising out of cultural differences as CRP staff provide services to an increasingly diverse group of consumers.

SUMMARY

The racial and ethnic profile of our nation is changing, with rapid growth of the Hispanic and Asian populations. In Section 21 of the 1992 Rehabilitation Act Amendments, Congress concluded that "patterns of inequitable treatment of minorities have been documented in all major junctures of the vocational rehabilitation process."

Section 21 is the authorizing legislation for capacity building projects funded under the Rehabilitation Services Administration. The Rehabilitation Research Initiative (RRI) is the first such project to focus on community rehabilitation programs. Preliminary results of research conducted by RRI indicates a need for training in diversity awareness and cultural competency. Diversity training tailored

to the specific needs of CRP's seems to be a critical need, in order to prepare CRP personnel to be effective service providers to an increasingly diverse consumer population.

Websites and Resources

Few resources exist that specifically target the diversity training and cultural competency needs of CRP's. However, the web site of the Rehabilitation Research Initiative (RRI) is a good place to start for a list of links related to diversity and CRP's. Selected links from

the RRI website are included below.

- The Rehabilitation Research Initiative (RRI) website www.panam.edu/dept/rehabri
- Guidelines for Conducting Diversity Training (US Office of Personnel Management) <http://opm.gov/hrd/lead/policy/divers97.asp>
- 101 Tools for Tolerance (Southern Poverty Law Center) http://www.tolerance.org/101_tools/index.html
- FREE MATERIALS for trainers, designed to promote respect and equity. <http://www.tolerance.org/teach/expand/res/index.jsp>
- Rehabilitation Providers Guide to Cultures of the Foreign Born (CIRRIE) <http://cirrie.buffalo.edu/mseries.html#series>

Rate your Own Diversity Behavior

How often do you:

- *interrupt someone who is telling a racial or ethnic joke?*
- *challenge friends expressing a gender stereotype?*
- *examine your own language for unconscious bias or stereotypes?*
- *take the lead in welcoming people of color to your class, club, job site, or living situation?*
- *protest unfair or exclusionary practices in an organization?*
- *think about ways you belong to oppressor or oppressed groups?*
- *celebrate your uniqueness?*

Meeting the continuing education needs of community rehabilitation providers

- The 2002 American Community Survey (US Census Bureau) <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Products/Profiles/Single/2002/ACS/index.htm>
- Mapping Census 2000: The Geography of US Diversity <http://www.census.gov/population/www/cen2000/atlas.html>
- Quiz: Test your cultural competency (US Bureau of Primary Health Care) <http://erc.msh.org/mainpage.cfm?file=3.0.htm&module=provider&language=English>
- Quiz: Test yourself for hidden bias http://www.tolerance.org/hidden_bias/index.html

VISIT OUR WEBSITE!



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