



Balancing Economics and Advocacy: UCEDDs' Role in Increasing the Awareness and Importance of Competitive Integrated Employment

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Introduction

University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) occupy a unique role within the Developmental Disabilities (DD) Network, by disseminating information, offering training, and conducting research. Still, there is an important key function that can have an impact on how the partners within a state move the needle on the employment rates of citizens with the most significant disabilities: a UCEDD can harness all its core functions and focus on a new brand of outreach, specifically to those parts of a state's economy that are often very separate from human service agencies, such as trade groups, economic forecasters, labor unions, legislative bodies, and workforce development entities. To do so requires a mindful shift from the language of advocacy to the vernacular of economics. In fact, if we look at this issue more deeply, and with purpose, we can see how often the typical advocacy efforts result in a confusing message. A legislative body may think all that the "disability community" desires is more funding, or a state-level economist might see disability as merely a marginalized demographic data point rather than a dynamic and diverse constituency with real purchasing power.ⁱ Public policy is integrally connected to economics, and to increase the rates of employment, self-determination, and inclusion, we must accept that language can put up more barriers than solutions. In this way, a UCEDD can function as translator, convener, and economic advocate. The words we choose can build communities.ⁱⁱ Below are some common methods of services advocacy juxtaposed with economic advocacy.



Exhibit 1. Services Advocacy and Economic Advocacy

Services Advocacy	Economic Advocacy
Focus is on waiver slots, preserving funding	Focus is on return-on-investment (ROI), purchasing power
Tasks include letter writing, email blasts, and calls to legislators	Tasks include conveying diversity, equity, and inclusion through employment
Words used focus on pity, loss, “otherness” and disempowerment	Words used focus on citizenship, workers’ rights, economic empowerment
Outcomes are oftentimes long-term segregation in facility-based programs	Outcomes are employment and financial contributions in local communities
Ongoing services are mostly professionalized	Ongoing supports also include natural, and co-worker-based approaches
Advocacy is largely episodic and urgency-based	Advocacy is consistent and rooted in economics that are community-specific

To balance these two demands, it is important to think about how to engage, enlist and enlarge different stakeholders through purposefully crafted messages. This can include delineating the roles that partners play in advancing employment through the UCEDD footprint. The first step is to analyze the capacities which already exist within the DD Network to convene and clarify roles, by involving subject matter experts, and by identifying existing campaigns, initiatives and programs that can bolster the economic message of competitive and integrated employment. A simple landscape assessment can be used to form a foundational framework to pursue innovation.ⁱⁱⁱ Here, lived experience is vital, and each of the four components detailed below should always include people with disabilities, and their families.

Teaching and Supporting the DD Network in Economics

Most human service professionals are more than capable of advocating for services and funding; however, it takes a mindful approach to broaden the conversation to include a focus that utilizes additional metrics other than those typically relied upon. Simple topics that include ROI connected to funding, as well as an overview of both large and small economic drivers, can be highlighted to make the concepts meaningful to existing advocacy efforts. A UCEDD can embrace its convening power and offer both space and expertise to create short, participatory trainings. Researchers, educators, and subject matter experts from schools of business and economics can be enlisted in this endeavor. Family members, workers with disabilities, and their employers, can be added to include stories of personal economic empowerment through employment. These narratives can make statistics more meaningful, and can also leverage messages about funding, transportation issues, and the need for on-going training. The goal of this component is to add to typical advocacy efforts to create and demonstrate the importance of economic citizenship through competitive, integrated employment (CIE).

Example:

A UCEDD could partner with a school of business to create a curriculum for advocates and direct support professionals, which focuses on simple and useful tools to include in a Legislative Day at the Capitol. The training would highlight how to communicate to elected officials the economic power of families and workers with disabilities. Simple and accessible infographics can be developed to convey these important statistics more easily. This step can change the advocacy



narrative and make it more meaningful for stakeholders that are not part of human services. Bridging priorities through the deliberate use of terms and language is key to expanding access to CIE. In addition, direct support professionals and advocacy constituents can be engaged more meaningfully in budget making and priority setting.

Bringing Awareness to Economic Development Personnel

Only in 2008 did the Bureau of Labor Statistics at the US Department of Labor include data sets related to employment and disability. To that end, most economists still do not include robust and expressive data in economic forecasts related to households with members with disabilities. Often, the information that is included does not reflect socially valued metrics or use predictive economic assessments regarding the fiscal impact related to the full employment of citizens with disabilities. To counter this reflexive tendency, we need to advocate for the inclusion of better data sets and bring awareness to economists and economic development professionals about disability inclusion. It is imperative that lived experience is front and center. Trainings on allyship, accessibility, and financial empowerment are of the utmost importance. This approach should focus on awareness in terms of work incentives, purchasing power, and the high-demand labor needs of a state/community, as well as the concerns of niche and entrepreneurial sectors. The goal in this step is to consistently bear the full force of citizens with disabilities in all aspects of a state's economic priorities. Funding pleas can be ignored, while consumer spending is the loudest voice in the room.

Example:

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act^{iv} (WIOA), with its provisions related to a unified state plan between vocational rehabilitation and general workforce services, and the activities related to a cycle of demonstration grants known as the Disability Employment Initiative (DEI), have created pathways regarding how economic development entities understand more fully the presence and power of people with disabilities. To that end, a UCEDD and its partners could use these two elements as a jumping off point for carrying the work forward. Starting with a state's unified plan, a simple and effective campaign regarding the employment rates of people with disabilities and the state's high-demand careers could be designed to allow for convening small workgroups to connect the two. Further, cross-training between the DD Network and the economic development entities could be coordinated such that social capital is built and knowledge transfer occurs outside the two insular worlds, an outcome in the true spirit of WIOA.

Engaging Legislative Representatives in Economic Advocacy

The challenge in this topic area is to change the conversation; that is, most elected officials hear from the "disability community" during budget sessions and even then, it is often the same rote "asks" from decades before. To successfully alternate from pure service advocacy language to the language of economics requires a serious discussion regarding a state's fragmented messaging delivered to elected officials who have a tremendous ability to influence the CIE rates for citizens with disabilities. While the focus remains squarely on the same concepts outlined above (ROI, purchasing power, etc.) it is beneficial to add elements of constituency, and ensure that the engagement is also rooted in the point of view of taxpayers and voters. Elected officials in state and local legislative bodies are swamped with requests, complaints, and a great deal of reading material. ***Making the economic argument for increasing rates of CIE should be easy to understand, accessible, and fully immersed in the lived experience of workers with disabilities.*** It



is important to make the information brief, concrete, and connected to voters, and economic growth. The approach here should straddle the traditional advocacy efforts around services and funding, but primarily focus on a voting bloc, which is workers with disabilities and their families.

Finally, including employers in this engagement is a terrific way to make it clear to state and local elected officials that disability policy must be economic in nature, and that constituents exist who want to work but need support in doing so.

Example:

A UCEDD could create an infographic that illustrates a state's demographics related to economics and disability, highlighting employment rates, purchasing power, and ROI metrics when workers with disabilities enter the workforce.^v The key here is simplicity. Large reports, dense white papers, and even presentations and videos can take too much time for an elected official to review. Instead, an artfully crafted infographic can efficiently convey vital facts and figures and is extremely easy to share on social media. Content is very much king in this effort and making certain that the data presented is timely and correct is important. Going back to our work with university researchers and economic development entities can bolster the message, make the information more meaningful, and show elected officials that our message is not only coming from human services, but business, industry, and local employers.

To increase the range and usability of an infographic on disability, employment, and economics, a UCEDD could use its power of dissemination to involve other stakeholders. Instead of relying on the traditional email blast approach, targeted and purposeful messages should be attached to the infographic, with attention given to timing of the legislative and/or budget creation season. (e.g., one would not want to send along information that was not pertinent to the work of committees, so knowing the timeline and focus areas of legislative sessions/hearings is critical).

Bringing the Power of Convening to Economics and Disability

With the major sectors engaged (DD Network, economic development, and elected officials), it is time to embrace a UCEDD's power of convening. "Bringing people together in an environment that encourages and facilitates idea exchange is one of the most powerful communications strategies for driving change."^{vi} There is a science to the act of convening and most UCEDD staff and DD Network personnel could benefit from using a Community of Practice (CoP) model as they think through how to convene, invite, follow-up, and refine the work surrounding the addition of economic advocacy to their skill sets. CoPs are rooted in evidence-based practices, and they are much more than simply "calling a meeting" or arranging for conference sessions. Convening through CoPs must be connected to three key principles: Domain (what are we trying to improve), Community (where are we trying to make those improvements) and, Practice (who wants to improve).^{vii} Therefore, a CoP related to economics and disability could be defined as a group of practitioners that are regularly convened to improve the representation of citizens with disabilities as taxpayers, employees, and purchasers, all three very valuable social roles in the American economy. A key takeaway here is for a focus on consistency, impact, and change. An important fundamental question to gauge progress would be: Do economic development initiatives, forecasts, and elected officials begin to reflect disability not only as a human services issue, but one that is inherently linked to economic indicators as well? Below are several possible examples of convening related to economics and disability.



Examples:

- Convening stakeholders to create a State as Model Employer (SAME) initiative.^{viii}
- Creating a CoP related to regularly disseminating metrics connected to disability and economics.
- Convening UCEDD staff doing employment work with economic development personnel working on attracting new businesses to a state/community.
- Facilitating workgroups in conjunction with Employment First plans that are rooted in key economic drivers (ROI, purchasing power, increased tax revenue).
- Convening focus groups with local and state employers in tandem with university business school faculty to explore what is and is not working with Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRP).^{ix}

Summary

Advocating for the expansion of CIE supports requires more than what our traditional advocacy efforts have delivered in the past. Universities can lead this charge by using the power of convening brought to bear by a UCEDD. Economic language, lived experience, and the imagery of competency must prevail and become the norm for advocacy efforts. In other words, the same techniques used before do not line up philosophically or economically with the demands of job seekers and their families. In addition, our elected officials need more hard data that can be used to convince taxpayers, public policy leaders, and employers that Americans with disabilities represent talent that can be leveraged to create inclusive workplaces and grow the economy to the benefit of individuals, families and communities.



Resources

- For best practices related to storytelling from the lens of lived experience, visit, www.tellthevaluedstory.com
- For journalism coverage regarding economics and disability, visit, <https://coveringpoverty.uga.edu/2022/04/13/beat-guide-disability/>
- For international information related to economics and disability visit, https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/events/1July2011_economics_panel_nexus.pdf
- For information and an overview of disability and socioeconomic status, visit, <https://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/disability>

i <https://iel.org/purchasing-power-people-disabilities/>

ii Simon S. Tam in a TED Talk and again at the Supreme Court during a trademark hearing.

iii https://ssir.org/articles/entry/design_thinking_for_social_innovation#

iv <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/wioa/>

v <https://www.forbes.com/sites/judyowen/2012/05/12/a-cost-benefit-analysis-of-disability-in-the-workplace/?sh=7394e4553501>

vi https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_power_of_convener_for_social_impact

vii <https://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/>

viii <https://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/work-matters-a-framework-for-states-on-workforce-development-for-people-with-disabilities.aspx>

ix <https://leadcenter.org/resources/employment-first-information-brief-perspective-of-employers-on-customized-employment/>

