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## Community Conversations: Finding solutions to increase employment for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities

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## **Community Conversations: Finding solutions to increase employment for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

We would like to acknowledge the community members who helped implement the community conversations event: Josh Barbour, Laura Dahill, Nancy Berge, Julie Henning, and Nicholas Kaasa

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# Community Conversations: Finding Solutions to Increase Employment for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

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## Abstract

*This study describes the implementation and findings of a pilot community conversations event in the state of Oregon to identify innovative solutions to under- and unemployment experienced by individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). The event was facilitated in partnership with the University of Oregon UCEDD, local Arc chapter, and other relevant community stakeholders. A total of 36 diverse individuals (e.g., school personnel, business owners, individuals with IDD, and caregivers of individuals with IDD) participated in a two-hour community conversations event about how to improve employment opportunities for those experiencing IDD. Participants engaged in discussions about solutions to employment challenges and completed a pre-post event survey about their experience at the event. Results from the survey and future considerations for additional community conversations are discussed*

## Plain Language Summary

*This paper describes a gathering of community members who worked together to find a solution to employing individuals with disabilities. Individuals from a Northwest community planned a community conversation event. This event allows for brainstorming solutions to a problem. Brainstorming occurs by bringing together different people with diverse viewpoints. A facilitator supports brainstorming and conversations. The facilitator also takes notes so members of the event can focus on finding solutions to a problem. Over 30 people participated in this event. The event planners placed people at different tables based on their roles in the community. This allowed for people to meet and listen to diverse voices. Each table included a teacher, family member, employer, and self-advocate. Our self-advocates had an intellectual or developmental disability. Researchers helped plan the event and support community members. The research team evaluated the event to help the community members collect and analyze data. This paper presents a description of the event and findings from the event. Data collected from this event suggest that community conversations are a positive catalyst to change. Participants enjoyed meeting other members in their communities. Participants also appreciated a group of diverse individuals working together to solve a problem.*

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We would like to acknowledge the community members who helped implement the community conversations event: Josh Barbour, Laura Dahill, Nancy Berge, Julie Henning, and Nicholas Kaasa.

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Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) experience higher rates of unemployment, underemployment, and segregation in employment settings than typical adults and those identified with other disabilities (e.g., learning disability, orthopedic impairment; Wagner et al., 2003). The discrepancy in rates of employment is staggering; only 19.3% of individuals with disabilities are employed compared to 66.3% of those who do not experience a disability (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Statistics for individuals with IDD are even more discouraging, with estimates of employment for this population as low as 10% (Butterworth & Migliore, 2015). These discrepancies highlight an inequitable reality for individuals with IDD and underscore the importance of efforts to close the employment gap and improve integrated and competitive employment outcomes. Educators and policymakers continue to work diligently to help close the employment gap through their respective means, yet much work remains.

### **Educator Practices**

Mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004), educators are required to implement transition planning for all individuals with disabilities to prepare them for employment, postsecondary education, and independent living. Educators implement a variety of classroom-based practices that are supported by research and promote positive postschool outcomes (Mazzotti et al., 2014, 2016; Test et al., 2009) and integrate transition-related skill development into academic content (Rowe et al., 2015). Some practices, including involvement in vocational education, work-based learning, and development of self-determination skills, are identified as predictors of positive postschool employment outcomes (Rowe et al., 2015; Shogren et al., 2014, 2015; Wehmeyer et al., 2006, 1996).

Work-based learning and paid work experiences for individuals with IDD provide an opportunity for employers to develop positive attitudes toward hiring and supporting individuals with IDD within their businesses. Positive attitudes and interactions with individuals with IDD are an influential factor in increasing employment rates for individuals with disabilities (Unger, 2002). However, discrimination and negative attitudes towards individuals with IDD persist and may lead to employment barriers (Livermore & Goodman, 2009). One approach to reducing discrimination and stigma is increasing positive interactions between education and employment sectors that support training and real-world experiences for individuals with IDD (Flippo & Butterworth, 2018). Unfortunately, the formation and facilitation of strong relationships between the education and employment sectors are complex and challenging.

### **Policy Initiatives**

The drastic differences between the employment rates of individuals with and without IDD are the result of a long history of segregation, maltreatment, stigma, and discrimination (Fleischer et al., 2012). In response to the historic disability rights movement, some protections from discrimination were instituted for those with disabilities (see Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973). Additional landmark legislation has been passed and amended since 1973 to reduce discrimination and increase the inclusion of individuals with disabilities within

society (e.g., American with Disabilities Act, 1990; IDEA, 2004). Because of the persistent under-employment and unemployment of individuals with disabilities, legislation has been enacted to support skill development and increase employment readiness for individuals with disabilities (e.g., IDEA, 2004; Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act, [WIOA] 2014). Other national initiatives focused primarily on improving employment outcomes for individuals with IDD include Employment First. The Employment First initiative, both a philosophy as well as a policy, purports that employment in the general workforce should be the first and preferred option for individuals with IDD and that public funding should prioritize this over other alternatives (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2020). This initiative acknowledged the years of segregation and subminimum wage often found in sheltered workshops or at employment sites with waivers to pay individuals less than minimum wage. It also guarantees competitive wages for individuals with IDD in inclusive and integrated work settings. While Employment First has taken root in several states throughout the country, it has yet to receive national sponsorship (Association of People Supporting Employment First, 2020).

### Community Conversations

Even with the implementation of evidence-based practices in special education environments, national policies and funding for services to prepare young adults with disabilities for employment, and good intentions, there continues to be chronic unemployment and under-employment of individuals with IDD (Lipscomb et al., 2017). To improve these outcomes and reduce perceived barriers, the education system and employment sector must work together to ensure a seamless transition to employment. Achieving these outcomes necessitates involving all relevant stakeholders, including employers, educators, and members of the community. To date, research has primarily focused on how education systems can better prepare individuals with IDD for employment with little to no emphasis or input and involvement from employers during transition planning (Riesen & Oertle, 2019). All relevant stakeholders must be included in developing policies and practices moving forward to help identify innovative strategies for overcoming systemic barriers to employment for individuals with IDD.

One strategy to bring multiple stakeholders to the table is community conversations, an asset-based approach to solving community-based problems (Carter & Bumble, 2018). The purpose of community conversations is to bring together an interdisciplinary group of individuals who typically may not have a chance to interact and provide them an opportunity to identify innovative solutions to pervasive problems within their community (Carter et al., 2009). Swedeen et al. (n.d.) identified four core principles of community conversations.

1. All communities possess unique opportunities, connections, resources, and relationships;
2. Members within each community are the experts on the most pressing challenges, the most viable solutions, the strategies that will work best, and the most effective ways to enlist others in support of change;
3. Any group of community members who come together – no matter how well-connected each individual already is – will learn about new resources, connections, and ideas by interacting with others who share different viewpoints and have different life experiences; and

4. Real change that lasts is most likely to come when ideas are based on locally feasible strategies and approaches. (p. 4)

There have been several occasions in which community conversations have been used to identify barriers and formulate solutions that individuals with disabilities face regarding employment. According to emerging research, community conversations may be an effective strategy to begin to address issues of unemployment and underemployment by identifying unique barriers found in their community and finding local solutions for individuals with IDD (Bumble et al., 2017, 2018; Dutta et al., 2016; Molfenter et al., 2018; Trainor et al., 2012).

The task of preparing individuals with IDD for integrated and inclusive employment cannot fall solely on educators (Flippo & Butterworth, 2018). A collaborative approach, including multiple agencies and community stakeholders, is imperative to support successful transitions for individuals with IDD. Community conversations has the potential to be a springboard for increased engagement and collaboration within a community with the ultimate goal of reducing the employment gap for individuals with disabilities; thus, creating a more equitable community (Bumble et al., 2018).

## Study Purpose

Because of the potential positive impact of community conversations on employment for individuals who experience IDD, a community group in Oregon piloted a community conversations event. This particular event was designed according to established research with considerations for the unique needs of the specific community of focus (see Swedeen et al., n.d.). The purpose of this evaluation was to demonstrate how a collaboration between a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD), community organizations, and community members came to fruition in an attempt to improve community-based employment opportunities for individuals with IDD. This manuscript outlines the development of an evaluation partnership and presents data from the pilot implementation of community conversations. We specifically address the following evaluation questions.

1. What are the perceptions of community members toward employment barriers and opportunities for individuals with I/DD in the community?
2. What were the perceived outcomes of the community conversations event?
3. What were the overall facilitator and participant perceptions of the community conversations event?

## Method

### Procedures

The University of Oregon Institutional Review Board reviewed our application to evaluate the implementation of the community conversations event and deemed the research as exempt.

To capture as much information from the small pilot event, the authors utilized both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a robust understanding of the event's process and impact. All participation in data collection activities (i.e., pre-post surveys, open-ended responses, facilitator feedback) were anonymous and voluntary. There were no incentives provided to participants for completing the surveys or interviews.

Successful implementation of a community conversations event necessitates the commitment of a group of community stakeholders with a mission to identify solutions to a pervasive issue in their community. A UCEDD sponsored guest lecture by Dr. Erik Carter on outcomes of individuals with IDD and community conversations, sponsored by the University of Oregon's UCEDD, was the impetus for the pilot event. After the guest lecture, an initial group of community members in attendance came together and agreed to work to implement a local community conversations event.

The Community Conversations Planning team (CC team) utilized the *Community Conversations Practical Guide* (Swedeen et al., n.d.) to inform the planning and implementation process. The CC team worked through steps suggested by Swedeen and colleagues including (a) choosing a focus for the event, (b) choosing questions that will be asked to the participants, (c) finding support for the event, (d) finding a venue and creating a comfortable space, (e) deciding on a date and time, (f) recruiting and marketing, and (g) choosing and training table facilitators.

Inspired by previous work to understand and begin to address employment inequities in other communities, the CC team chose to focus on employment for individuals with IDD for the first community conversations event. Once a focus was selected, the CC team came to consensus on what two questions would be asked at the event. The CC team also identified when the event would be. The community conversations event was scheduled 8 months after the initial team meeting to coincide with the National Disability Employment Awareness Month celebrated by the Office of Disability Employment Policy. In addition, a gathering space at a local community church was identified as the event site.

During twice-monthly meetings, the CC team continued to use the community conversations practical guide to provide directions on logistics (i.e., where and when) and procedural considerations (i.e., accessibility issues and event participant make-up). Funding for the event was also discussed during CC team meetings and a need for funding to implement event activities was determined. Initial funding was made possible by sponsorship from the University of Oregon UCEDD. Additional funding was acquired after members of the CC team were awarded a Better Together grant sponsored by the Oregon Council on Developmental Disabilities (OCDD). Funds from both the University of Oregon UCEDD and Better Together grant were used to purchase all food, drinks, and supplies (i.e., disposable plates, napkins, utensils) needed to serve dinner to the large group. These funds were also used to hire a caterer with autism to provide dinner for the event, allowing the event to serve as a successful example of inclusive employment.

Last, because the event was planned as a pilot to inform future community conversations, CC team members created a means for evaluation. Evaluation procedures included a review of

previously conducted evaluation surveys (i.e., Carter et al., 2012), identification of event activities that needed evaluative questions, and the creation of new additional survey items that were not already used in previous research. A pre-post evaluation survey was created to examine changes in participant perceptions before and after the community conversations event, as well as facilitator perceptions on what occurred at their table.

### **Setting and Participants**

The CC team planning meetings convened in person at the University of Oregon. Meetings were held approximately twice per month leading up to the community conversations event and lasted 60 minutes. The location for the community conversations event (i.e., a community church) was selected for the following reasons: (a) it was accessible for mobility devices, (b) it had a large meeting room to hold up to 50 participants, (c) technology capabilities to project presentation materials were available, and (d) it had an accessible kitchen to prepare, cook, and serve dinner at the event.

### **Community Conversations Team**

Team members included family liaisons from the local Arc chapter, associates with the local developmental disability services office, representatives from a local job training organization, members of a disability-focused technology firm, a transition technical assistance provider for local school districts, and higher education faculty and researchers. The CC team members were the drivers of the implementation of the community conversations event and the process and impact evaluation. Because the event was facilitated by community members and designed specifically for the community, the authors would like to acknowledge that the CC team and facilitators worked together to write this manuscript.

### **Community Conversations Facilitators**

Table facilitators were recruited for each table at the event and included four doctoral students from special education and school psychology and two research associates from the University of Oregon. The table facilitators participated in a 2-hour training created for the event by CC Team members that included (a) the purpose of a community conversations event; (b) expectations for table facilitation (i.e., read the community conversations questions to their table, keep conversations progressing and on topic, assure all participants at their table have a chance to participate, and take detailed notes); and (c) management of event logistics (e.g., rapport building with table participants, mediation if a challenge arises, time management, and note taking).

### **Community Conversations Participants**

The CC team came to consensus that a wide range of community representation was desired at the event and each table, with an understanding that it was impossible to include all the relevant community stakeholders. During planning meetings, the CC team decided



representatives from the following community sectors would be recruited: (a) school personnel who work with transition-age youth, (b) a business representative who employed a person experiencing IDD, (c) a business representative who had not employed an individual with IDD, (d) personnel from a community agency that works with individuals with IDD, (e) a caregiver of a young adult with IDD, and (f) a self-advocate (i.e., a young adult with IDD). The CC team engaged in purposeful recruitment (Palinkas et al., 2015) to ensure equitable numbers of representatives were present at the event and in each facilitated discussion group. Recruitment of participants began by reaching out to personal and local networks to advertise and invite participants from the different stakeholder groups. Recruitment methods included sending emails, making phone calls, and inviting business owners in person. A total of 36 participants attended the event (six participants at six tables). Of note, there was not equal representation of participant groups at the event. Because of over representation, some tables had either more school personnel or community provider personnel. In addition, the sample size per group shown in Table 1 and 2, do not accurately describe the full sample. This is because the original intention for this community conversation was for evaluation purposes. Only data from participants who consented to have their data aggregated as part of a study are presented below.

## Measures

To evaluate the event, the CC team and facilitators administered multiple measures to collect evaluative data that would inform any future event iterations. Measures were used to collect information on (a) participant perceptions of the event and (b) facilitator perceptions of the event. Measures collected data via Likert-type rating scales and questions with an open-ended response option.

### ***Participant Perceptions***

The CC team and facilitators reviewed and adapted a published community conversations evaluation measure (see Carter et al., 2012) to capture participant perceptions of employment barriers and opportunities for individuals with IDD. The pre- and post-event survey consisted of six items with a 4-point Likert-type response option from 1 (i.e., Strongly Disagree) to 4 (i.e., Strongly Agree). Pre- and post-event survey items are listed in Tables 1 and 2 in the Results section.

An additional seven items (see Carter et al., 2012) were included in the post-event survey to capture participant perceptions of the event. These additional items also had a 4-point Likert-type response option from 1 (i.e., Strongly Disagree) to 4 (i.e., Strongly Agree). Post-event survey items are listed in Table 2.

The post-event survey also provided an opportunity for participants to respond to three open-ended questions. These questions included: (1) *What idea was the best that you heard during tonight's community conversations?* (2) *If I were asked what recommendations I had for improving the quality of this evening, I would suggest...*, and (3) *I wish the following people from our community had been present at tonight's event...* These questions helped us understand how

to make the next community conversations event more effective.

### Facilitator Perceptions

The six table facilitators were asked their perceptions of the event in a thirteen-item post-event survey. Facilitator perceptions were captured by ten items with a four-point Likert-type response option from one (i.e., Strongly Disagree) to four (i.e., Strongly Agree). Example items in the facilitator evaluation included: *The people at my table provided actionable or innovative solutions to the first and second questions, Participants were engaging with each other during the table discussions, and I felt that this event was able to capture the solutions to the problem as it was meant to do.* Facilitators were also asked to answer three open-ended response items that included: *What other voices needed to be heard in the community conversations? Are there any cultural concerns (e.g., location, disability) that were not addressed that needed to be in this community conversations? How do you suggest improving this event?*

### Data Analysis

Our evaluation utilized quantitative data analysis for the Likert-type scale surveys and qualitative data analysis for open-response questions. Because of the small number of participants and the survey's limited sensitivity to change, descriptive statistics (e.g., means and standard deviations) were calculated to analyze facilitator and participant quantitative data. Basic thematic coding was used to identify overarching themes from facilitator notes and any written responses from open-ended responses by participants (Miles et al., 2013). Because of the limited number of participants, a deep examination of meaning and generalization from the data was not tenable. Instead, the authors reviewed notes and responses in detail to determine if any inductive themes were salient across participants.

## Results

### Perceptions of Employment Barriers and Opportunities

Data from pre- and post-event surveys were designed for evaluative purposes to explore participant's perceptions of employment barriers and opportunities for individuals with IDD. No hypotheses were identified prior to the CC event regarding the effect the event may have on participant attitudes. Table 1 provides pre- and post-event comparisons by type of participant. Means from pre- and post-event survey data suggest that, overall, participants did not believe (i.e., "disagreed") there were many opportunities for youth with disabilities to work in the summer months ( $M_{pre} = 2.23$ ,  $M_{post} = 2.23$ ,  $n_{pre \text{ and } post} = 30$ ). Participants also disagreed that employers were generally positive about hiring individuals with disabilities in the summer months ( $M_{pre} = 2.44$ ,  $n_{pre} = 29$ ;  $M_{post} = 2.24$ ,  $n_{post} = 31$ ). In addition, on average, participants were not agreeable to the statement "*strong partnerships between schools and employers currently exist in my community*" ( $M_{pre} = 2.41$ ,  $n_{pre} = 27$ ;  $M_{post} = 2.94$ ,  $n_{post} = 31$ ).

**Table 1**  
*Pre- and Post-Event Participant Perceptions of Employment Barriers and Opportunities*

Participant	Many employment opportunities exist in my community for youth with disabilities in the summer months		Employers in my community are generally positive about hiring youth with disabilities in afterschool or summer jobs		Employers in my community may need help learning how to support youth with disabilities on the job		Strong partnerships and employers currently exist in my community		My community currently has the ability to support youth with disabilities in jobs		I believe my community leaders believe it is important to improve employment opportunities for youth with disabilities	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
<b>Self-advocate</b>												
Mean	3.33	3.33	3.00	3.00	3.67	4.00	2.67	3.00	3.33	3.33	3.33	3.67
Sample	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
<b>Caregiver</b>												
Mean	2.00	1.71	2.28	2.25	3.71	2.88	2.33	2.13	2.43	2.50	2.43	2.43
Sample	7	7	7	8	7	8	6	8	7	8	7	7
<b>Business hired</b>												
Mean	2.00	2.17	2.23	2.00	3.80	3.67	2.00	1.83	2.60	2.50	2.80	2.33
Sample	5	6	4	6	5	6	4	6	5	6	5	6
<b>Business not hired</b>												
Mean	2.0	2.0	3.0	2.0	3.5	4.0	1.5	2.5	2.0	2.5	2.5	2.5
Sample	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
<b>School personnel or agency</b>												
Mean	2.23	2.33	2.38	2.25	3.77	3.67	2.67	2.33	2.92	2.92	3.00	2.83
Sample	13	12	13	12	13	12	12	12	13	12	13	12
<b>Total</b>												
Mean	2.23	2.23	2.44	2.24	3.73	3.77	2.41	2.94	2.73	2.74	2.83	2.70
Sample	30	30	29	31	30	31	27	31	30	31	30	30

Note. 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree.

Participants were also asked about their perceptions of their community. Regarding the community's ability to support youth with disabilities in employment, participants on average did not believe that this was a strength of the community ( $M_{pre} = 2.73$ ,  $n_{pre} = 30$ ,  $M_{post} = 2.74$ ,  $n_{post} = 37$ ). Participants, on average, also disagreed with the idea that community leaders believed it was important to improve employment for individuals with disabilities ( $M_{pre} = 2.83$ ,  $n_{pre} = 30$ ,  $M_{post} = 2.70$ ,  $n_{post} = 30$ ). Finally, participants were asked whether employers needed help learning how to support youth with disabilities on the job. On average, participants agreed that employers needed to learn how to support youth ( $M_{pre} = 3.73$ ,  $n_{pre} = 30$ ;  $M_{post} = 3.77$ ,  $n_{post} = 31$ ). Table 2 provides data from the post-event survey across participant role.

### Perceived Outcomes

The post-event survey that was given to attendees at the event provided an opportunity to reflect on the event and their feelings about being included in community conversations. Table 2 provides post-event data across participant roles. On average, when asked about aspects of the community, participants were more likely to disagree with the statement *"I learned about resources, opportunities, or connection in my community that I previously did not know about"* ( $M_{post} = 2.97$ ,  $n_{post} = 30$ ) and were more likely to agree with the statement, *"The conversation this evening improved my perceptions of the capacity of our community to improve work outcomes for youth with disabilities"* ( $M_{post} = 3.06$ ,  $n_{post} = 31$ ). Participants were also asked to respond to statements about employment. On average, participants agreed that *the conversation will contribute to better employment opportunities for youth with disabilities in the community* ( $M_{post} = 3.17$ ,  $n_{post} = 30$ ), and they agreed that *they were able to identify things they could do to enhance employment opportunities for youth with disabilities in the community* ( $M_{post} = 3.10$ ,  $n_{post} = 30$ ). Additionally, participants responded favorably to statements about the event. For example, on average, participants agreed with statements *tonight's conversation was a valuable investment of my time* ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $n = 30$ ), and *tonight I met people I could work with in the future* ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $n = 30$ ).

Participants also voluntarily answered open-ended responses to help the CC team understand innovative ideas that emerged during the event. Depending on their role, participants had different reflections on innovative ideas that came from the community conversations. Participants from a business background, whether they had employed an individual experiencing IDD or not, felt it was important to help *"educate employers about the benefits and resources available to support them and the employee"* and that *"having job agencies get together to get advice/new ideas"* and *"going to employer community groups to educate"* would be beneficial strategies for the community to engage in Business participants also felt it was important to improve the dissemination of information, indicating that there should be *"more information sharing among all support organizations."*

School personnel also discussed finding innovative ways to connect young adults with IDD to businesses. Suggestions included the use of *"video resumes"* (i.e., a video documentation of skills and interest to demonstrate workplace competence to employers) to help youth demonstrate skills desired by businesses. Other discussion items included *"improving*

**Table 2**  
*Post-Event Participant Perceptions of Event Outcomes*

Participant	Tonight, I learned about resources, opportunities, or connections in my community that I previously did not know about	Tonight's conversation will contribute to better employment opportunities for youth with disabilities in my community	I was able to identify things I could do to enhance employment opportunities for youth with disabilities in my community	The conversation this evening improved my perceptions of the capacity of our community to improve work outcomes for youth with disabilities	Tonight's conversation was a valuable investment of my time	I would invite someone I know to attend another event like this one if it were held in the future	Tonight, I met people I could work with in the future
<b>Self-advocate</b>							
Mean	3.33	3.33	3.33	3.67	4.00	3.67	4.00
Sample	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
<b>Caregiver</b>							
Mean	2.88	3.00	3.00	2.63	3.50	3.43	3.38
Sample	8	8	8	8	8	7	8
<b>Business hired</b>							
Mean	2.83	3.17	3.00	3.00	3.33	3.33	3.67
Sample	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
<b>Business not hired</b>							
Mean	3.50	3.50	4.00	4.00	3.50	4.00	4.00
Sample	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
<b>School personnel or agency</b>							
Mean	2.91	3.18	3.00	3.08	3.73	3.64	3.73
Sample	11	11	11	12	11	11	11
<b>Total</b>							
Mean	2.97	3.17	3.10	3.06	3.60	3.55	3.67
Sample	30	30	30	31	30	29	30

Note. 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree.

*transportation” and using “ride shares” as a means to reduce transportation barriers to get students to work. Making connections with businesses was also emphasized with participants recommending a “focus on business outreach, business partnership program,” “educating business owners/employers of benefits to their company hiring adults with disabilities,” and that “WE need to educate employers about people with disabilities and not be afraid to hire and include them into their business.”*

Parents or caregivers of a person with IDD also appreciated the idea of businesses who had employed a person with IDD mentoring other businesses indicating that *“business mentorships, presentation to business groups, having a central hub of information and creating a universal packet for potential employers”* would be viable strategies. Caregivers also believed that *“creating a PR campaign for business”* would be a benefit to the community.

## **Participant Feedback on Event Implementation**

### ***Participant Perceptions***

After the event, participants answered two open-ended prompts to help the CC team understand how to improve future community conversations. Participant responses from the open-ended prompt, *“If I were asked what recommendations I had for improving the quality of this evening, I would suggest...,”* were reviewed for salient themes. One theme that emerged across multiple participants was to have more representatives from local businesses involved in the next event. Some participants felt that there was plenty of representation of individuals from the disability community (i.e., special educators, service providers) and not enough representation from employers, which would have allowed for more diverse conversations and perspectives. The second theme that emerged focused on the logistics of the event. Participants believed that the acoustics in the event space was too loud, making it difficult to hear other members at their table. This suggests that a bigger room for the event where tables could be spread out and distribute sound more evenly would have been beneficial. Third, some participants asked for more opportunities to hear from self-advocates, indicating *“more share outs from self-advocates about their experience highlighting popular job activities.”* One self-advocate even asked for more discussion time to share with their table members. Finally, many participants who responded to the prompt were very pleased with the outcome of the event and requested more time to connect, sharing *“it was great! More discussions of questions with everyone.”*

Overall, participants responded to the prompt *“I wish the following people from our community had been present at tonight’s event...”* consistently across roles and communicated they wanted more businesses that have and have not hired individuals with IDD present at the community conversations event. Some participants identified certain types of employers they desired to be at the event: *“some large employers”* or *“rural business leaders.”* Other participants felt it was important to have more agencies involved including the local Chamber of Commerce, Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Developmental Disability Services, and local government.

### **Facilitator Perceptions**

For a more robust evaluation of the event, the CC team felt it was important to gather participant perceptions as well as perceptions of the table facilitators. Table facilitators were asked to respond to 10 statements on a 4-point Likert-type scale from 1 (i.e., Strongly Disagree) to 4 (i.e., Strongly Agree) about their experience at the event. Responses included: *“The people at my table provided actionable or innovative solutions to the first and second questions”* ( $M_{Q1} = 3.60, n_{Q1} = 6; M_{Q2} = 3.80, n_{Q2} = 6$ ). Facilitators, on average, agreed that *“Everyone had the opportunity to provide input”* ( $M = 3.80, n = 6$ ), *“Participants were engaged with each other during the conversation”* ( $M = 3.80, n = 6$ ), and *“The event was able to capture the solutions to the problem it was meant to do”* ( $M = 3.20, n = 6$ ). Facilitators were more likely to disagree with the statement, *“The individuals at their table learned something from the opening presentation [by a self-advocate]”* ( $M = 2.80, n = 6$ ).

Facilitators also rated, on a scale of 1 to 3 (i.e., 1 = shorter, 2 = right amount of time, and 3 longer), that they believed the event could be shorter ( $M = 1.80, n = 6$ ). Finally, facilitators were asked to reflect on their role and training. The facilitators, on average, agreed that they *“Were accurately able to summarize in their notes the participants ideas and thoughts”* ( $M = 3.60, n = 6$ ) and *“Were able to keep the conversations at their table focused on the two community conversations questions”* ( $M = 3.40, n = 6$ ). The responses to the final item suggested, on average, that the facilitators agreed that *“The facilitator training provided good guidance for the event”* ( $M = 3.80, n = 6$ ).

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this event description and evaluation was to provide an example of how to create and implement a pilot community conversations event collaboratively. A second purpose was to provide a summative process and impact evaluation of the event with the hope to aid in the future implementation of other community conversations. There were a few key results worth discussing, including (a) participant emphasis on having more business representation at the event, (b) the positive impact a diverse network of participants can have on the event, and (c) the need for a strong collaborative planning team.

The resounding desire to have more representatives from local businesses at the event was clearly communicated, which aligns with similar findings to a previously conducted community conversations event (Bumble et al., 2018). The CC team intended to have much higher representation of business and during the planning period ran into many barriers recruiting employers to participate. Because of these difficulties, the CC team had to edit the two small group discussion questions to discuss how to encourage the involvement of more business representatives in future events. This allowed for tables to discuss solutions rather than focusing on the low number of business representatives at the event. Some solutions included business-to-business peer mentorship and education. A common sentiment communicated throughout the table discussion was that businesses need to know how to talk with other businesses. For example, participants suggested that businesses that have successfully hired an individual with

IDD should be encouraged to share their positive experiences, an important first step in starting to dispel myths and address any implicit bias. Some participants suggested that businesses have a responsibility to understand the benefits of hiring individuals with IDD and that more outreach to businesses around the Employment First initiative and other policies that support the competitive employment of individuals with IDD may be necessary.

Second, while the business perspective may have been underrepresented, data from the event suggest that the use of community conversations may be a tool to help individual's network and identify innovative solutions to problems, affirming the event's intended purpose. A common saying from the disability rights movement, "*nothing about us without us*," reminds practitioners and researchers that the voice of all individuals must be included in these discussions of that change and solutions will not come without the voice of individuals with disabilities. This is a pivotal point, as the community conversation must be centered around the individuals in which we are working to support. Without centering conversations around disability and listening to the voices of individuals who experience disability, there is a great risk of continuing exclusionary practices.

Expanding the participant network and diversifying representation at each table allowed for distinct ideas and perspectives to be heard concerning the complex issue of under-employment and unemployment of individuals with IDD. Some of the more widely endorsed suggestions (e.g., ride share ideas to help with transportation to work) came from self-advocates, which indicates the value of incorporating those experiencing disability into these events. To address potential bias and break down barriers to employment, some participants promoted video resumés.

Finally, the overall positive perceptions from participants can partially be attributed to the strong collaborative community conversations planning team. In any event, success comes from a group of committed individuals who are willing to pool resources together to create an opportunity for an inclusive, solution-focused event.

## Limitations

There were a few limitations to the pilot community conversations event. First, the limited number of participants made it difficult to generalize findings. The sample size also prevented the ability to conduct repeated measures analysis to statistically evaluate mean differences of participant responses. The second limitation pertains to missing data. The completion of pre- and post-event assessments was voluntary, preventing data collection from all participants at both timepoints, which also explains different sample sizes. Third, while the goal was to have a balance of participant roles at each table, there was an underrepresentation from the business community, even when multiple recruitment methods were used. This could potentially bias and skew the conversation while missing more employer voice. Finally, while there was representation of self-advocates at every table, only three self-advocates completed the pre-post survey. To ensure full participation of self-advocates, structures should always be in place to evaluate our practices and design them to be accessible for all. Part of our facilitator's



directions were to support self-advocates in completing the pre-post assessment if they consented to do so. A limitation is the uncertainty of whether self-advocates did not complete the survey because (a) the pre-post survey was inaccessible to them, or (b) they made a decision to decline to participate.

### **Future Considerations**

As Carter and Bumble (2018) indicated, community conversations have many promising elements including: (a) involvement of new voices, (b) identification of localized ideas, (c) a solution focused framing to a complex problem, (d) building awareness, and (e) a shared commitment to solving a problem. Findings align with other community conversations events that have focused on employment issues for individuals with IDD (see Bumble et al., 2018). Parallel findings include solutions focused on: (a) enhancing inclusive workplaces such as educating employers about disability-specific employment supports (e.g., funding mechanisms for job coaching or other accommodations), (b) undertaking community-wide efforts like transportation services to ensure individuals with IDD can access work on time with any needed supports, and (c) strengthening school/transition services such as inclusion of agencies during transition planning and more work-based learning opportunities. These parallel findings begin to illuminate that while community conversations focus on local solutions, similar barriers to employment persists across communities. Gathering more data on specific barriers and solutions that are identified within community conversations may provide guidance on the formation of more national solutions.

Another similar finding was the smaller representation of the business sector at this pilot community conversations (Bumble et al., 2018). Without having employers at the table, a very important stakeholder perspective is lost and not heard. Findings from this community conversation suggest that participants were not agreeable that work was available for individuals with IDD in the community. There was also consensus that employers needed to be educated on employing individuals with IDD, which is a similar finding to Bumble and Carter (2020). Ensuring opportunities to gain employer perspectives on what they do and do not know may be a critical first step. Also finding optimal times for employer participation is important so that it may be more feasible to attend future community conversations. Reflecting on this community conversation, we may consider surveying businesses on event logistics (e.g., best day/time and location). It may behoove groups implementing similar events to first survey employers to identify how to better encourage participation.

### **Implications for Future Practice**

One common implication for future research found across studies (Bumble et al., 2018; Bumble & Carter, 2017; Carter et al., 2012) includes suggestions for how to generalize solutions identified within community conversations into community practice. Community conversations are solution-focused but little information is available on what, if anything, is changed in the community following the event. Future iterations that involve this methodology should have plans to follow-up with attendees as part of the study to gather information on if and what

changed because of their experience with the event. Learning of changed behaviors or connections that were made as part of the event could help (a) inform how to make a replication of the event more effective, and (b) provide details to future attendees about what community conversations are and what are expected outcomes are for attending. The CC team believed this was the first step in a long process toward change. After pilot implementation, additional stakeholders have been identified to participate in future conversations, recruitment strategies have been revised to increase participation of stakeholders that were underrepresented and plans for additional funding and collaboration started so another successful community conversation can take place. Moving forward, the CC team understands that educators, employers, and policy makers must communicate and collaborate so employment opportunities are available for all, not just some. Creating inclusive community conversation opportunities with agents of change (e.g., policy makers, and business leaders and owners) is a pivotal next step for our community and providing equitable employment opportunities for individuals with IDD.

## Conclusion

The use of community conversations to discuss common challenges in the disability community is a powerful tool to bring together a variety of individuals to begin to troubleshoot pervasive problems of practice. Understanding that the problem of under- and unemployment is a community issue that can only be solved through collaborative and coordinated action to allow for innovative solutions that meet local needs. We encourage communities to identify a specific issue and implement their own inclusive, solution-focused community conversations event.

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