
THE IMPACT OF THE CARL D. PERKINS ACT ON VOCATIONAL ASSESSMENT: HOW WE CAN MEET THE MANDATE

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Abstract

The Perkins assessment assurance has created an accelerated interest in vocational evaluation and assessment. Interpretation of this assurance and subsequent implementation activities will have far-reaching implications on the vocational evaluation profession. Expansion of vocational assessment services and development of different methods and strategies for reaching a larger number of handicapped and disadvantaged individuals are needed while not foresaking the integrity of assessment.

Vocational assessment and evaluation have experienced a gradual but continuous development. The field has been effected by the emergence of variations in this process-oriented service as they have been applied to a variety of settings. Historically, vocational evaluation has been identified with vocational rehabilitation. Literature documents that vocational assessment has emerged in other human service delivery systems, such as school settings and manpower programs (Peterson, 1985), thus creating other, though shorter, histories. Whenever vocational assessment is described and utilized in a process format as opposed to a fragmented, hit-or-miss series of screening or category testing (e.g. specific aptitude testing for entry into a job or training program), the profession is profoundly effected. If one scans the historical development of the profession, it becomes apparent that most changes precipitated by the use of vocational assessment in settings different from rehabilitation have resulted in improvements, expansions, and more clarity in the delivery process. Recently, however, confusion and controversy have accompanied most national "discussions" about the types of services which are most appropriate.

Equity and Quality

The most recent impetus for change and refinement represents a legislative mandate, The Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act of 1984. Thus far, this "impetus" has fostered an increased intensity in debates about appropriate and cost effective vocational assessment services. The content of these debates will not be addressed in this article. However, the fact that controversy and differences of opinion exist, should not be ignored. This author's view is that we must look upon the Perkins Act as a challenge to improve and upgrade our services and that current controversies will force us to refine the concepts inherent in vocational assessment and allow us to create better service delivery systems.

Many practitioners and advocates who serve individuals with disabilities or disadvantages view the Perkins Act as an extension of earlier landmark civil rights statutes, such as the Education of all Handicapped Children Act of 1975, P.L. 94-142. Their appraisal is based on the frequent cross references to P.L. 94-142 and the inclusion of all populations into appropriate vocational education programs in a least restrictive environment.

Most knowledgeable advocates for appropriate and improved vocational preparation of special populations realize that equity begets quality, which, in turn, provides better and more equitable instruction and services for all

students. For example, by adapting lesson plans for a learning disabled individual who has weak auditory but strong visual or tactile learning preferences, others in the class with similar learning styles benefit from the changes.

Assessment in a Vocational Education Context

When analyzing the implications of the assessment component in the Perkins Act, one primary factor should be kept in mind. That is, when planning for and implementing the assessment assurance it must be viewed within the context of more global, vocational education. In other words, this is but one of several assurances which should lead to more equitable and effective vocational preparation of students. In order for handicapped and disadvantaged students to realize the full intent of the mandate -- that they should be afforded the same vocational opportunities which others enjoy -- the entire package of assurances must be met. Briefly, the other assurances involve equal access to

- (1) the full range of programs
- (2) all occupationally specific programs
- (3) cooperative education
- (4) apprenticeship programs

in the least restrictive environment with the support or supplemental services necessary for full participation and successful program completion.

Translated into practical terms, (1) "full range of programs" means that an individual who is interested in business/office occupations should have access to advanced data processing as well as to the more introductory typing course. Access is qualified, however, by the appropriateness of the match between program requirements (e.g. prerequisite and entry level skills, performance criteria and exit level competencies) and the abilities and interest of students. Thus, architects of the Perkins Act provide a rationale for requiring that handicapped and disadvantaged be provided "assessment."

Regarding (2) "all occupationally specific programs" means that handicapped and disadvantaged should not be limited to participation in traditional, stereotypical vocational courses, such as food services, masonry, maintenance or custodial work. Rather they should have access to electronics, computer sciences, licensed practical nursing and others which require higher levels of functioning. Again, a rationale for assessment is provided in that prescriptions of support will be needed to ensure that participation will be successful. Cooperative education, (3), alludes to an established and highly successful vocational education content area which frequently has not included many handicapped students, partly because special education often has parallel work experience programs for this population. This practice is viewed by many as a duplication of effort. Inclusion of special education students into "regular" cooperative education programs would provide expertise from personnel trained in the matters of community-business-industry partnerships for providing actual job experiences. Release of the special educators from work

experience coordinating activities, for which they are usually not trained, would free them to provide support to students participating in the "regular" program -- and, for this they are trained.

Finally, (4) "apprenticeship programs" has been an underutilized educational option for many students who require supplemental services to achieve success. Apprenticeships allow students a "foot in the door" to continue training after formal schooling and the opportunity to train and work with master craftsmen, which will eventually enhance their life-long achievements.

Thus, when considering the nature of these assurances, the implications for assessment become more obvious in that the type of appraisal referred to and required is vocational in orientation. Assessment personnel must be intimately familiar with and knowledgeable of all vocational education programs and opportunities. Inherent in the familiarization process for vocational assessment personnel is the understanding that frequent contacts will be made with vocational educators. Neubert (1985) found that vocational assessment services were utilized more effectively and placement recommendations were more frequently and successfully implemented due to the mutual trust and rapport that was nurtured between vocational instructors and vocational assessment personnel. Another inherent notion crystallizes the participation of vocational instructors in the assessment process by

- o assisting with the development of work samples or situational assessments for their occupational areas;
- o collecting assessment data via traditional instructional evaluation procedures as well as those collaboratively established with vocational assessment personnel;
- o conducting "specific training assessments" or job/shop tryouts for students who may have an interest and potential in particular occupational areas.

Vocational assessment should generically incorporate the content areas in vocational education: health, agriculture, distributive and marketing education, business and office education, cooperative work experiences, home economics, trade and industry programs, and though it is not always included under vocational education, industrial arts. More specifically, vocational assessment should also be relevant to the training and employment opportunities unique to the school system and the community at large.

Assessment Assurance: What It Says and Does Not Say

For the intent of this assessment assurance to be realized to the maximum extent, anyone involved in planning, implementing, and accounting for the act should be knowledgeable about 1) what the actual statute states, 2) what guidelines federal policy-makers, in this case the U.S. Department of Education, has issued, 3) how state education agencies interpret it, 4) how local education agencies interpret, implement and evaluate it. Specifically, the assessment assurance states

"each student who enrolls in vocational education programs and to whom subsection (b) applies" (subsection (b) lists eligibility factors for disadvantaged and handicapped students) "shall receive (1) assessment of the interests, abilities, and special needs of such student with respect to completing successfully the vocational education program;" (Title II, Part A, Section 204(c), P.L. 98-524).

It is noteworthy that the language "who enrolls in" makes it unclear as to who is guaranteed or eligible for assessment: is it those who may enroll in or those already placed in vocational education programs?

Power of Interpretation

A positive aspect of vague and nebulous legislative language, involves the empowerment of decision-makers and policy analysts to interpret mandates in ways that fall within their capability to implement them, allow maximum use of minimal resources, and still meet compliance expectations of the law. On the other hand, a negative aspect permits many who may not agree with the intent of the law to expend as few resources as possible to minimally or marginally be in compliance.

To date, the U.S. Office of Education has not issued formal guidelines for compliance.

However, an informal, working draft of "minimum guidelines" for the first year of Perkins was disseminated to all state vocational education special needs administrators. These guidelines do not constitute official regulations. The draft specifies the following "minimum basic requirements"

- o identification of occupational interests
 - expressed - via structured interview
 - testing - via interest survey
 - manifested - via observations by teachers using structured rating forms
- o identification of abilities via test information and "hands-on" activities to include aptitudes, skills, special abilities, manipulative skills and dexterities.
- o identification of learning styles via classroom observation via student-stated preference via learning style inventory.

Inherent within the assessment process are interpretations to the student, restatement of vocational opportunities, and opportunities for student to make vocational choices based on assessment information.

Though sketchy, the message from the federal level seems clear, that the rules for providing credible assessments in any situation also apply to vocational assessment. For example, a variety of techniques and instruments should be employed and a variety of individuals should conduct assessment activity, and feedback should be provided to the student, to name a few. It is critical to note that the use of expensive, commercial instruments or systems is not mentioned. This does not preclude the value and effective use of commercial tools, but there are no requirements to use them.

A phenomenon occurs when people are required to implement an assessment mandate, people often panic and are prone to search for, and ultimately use "the one instrument or system" which will answer all assessment questions, be appropriate for all populations, and fulfill the compliance obligations. Nothing is accomplished by using one tool or technique but people dupe themselves into believing that the one-stop assessment tool is worthwhile. By utilizing a variety of techniques, a combination of processes for assessment, and interspersing standardized or commercial instruments with locally developed ones, implementation is easier, elicits more accurate results, and can serve a greater number of students. Furthermore, the training and inclusion of various educational personnel in the assessment process, allows more individuals to receive a longer-term appraisal. Within the educational system guidance counselors, special education teachers, vocational educators, "regular" education teachers can all contribute to the assessment process. However, it is preferable if a professional trained in vocational assessment methodology or vocational evaluation trains, coordinates, and monitors vocational assessment activities.

Use of existing assessment programs should be incorporated into the process for individuals who require additional or different assessments. A number of local systems use private or public vocational rehabilitation, vocational evaluation programs and facilities rather than duplicating local services. Some states are interpreting the statute and guidelines in a conservative manner. Others are viewing these as an opportunity to utilize funds for targeted priorities. In both instances, handicapped and disadvantaged students will benefit. Before the benefits can be achieved, a long, time-consuming process must be worked through by professionals who are committed to long range positive outcomes.

The more conservative approach involves interpreting the eligible recipients for assessment, "student who enrolls in" as only those who are already enrolled in vocational education programs -- which can include pre-vocational or exploratory classes and which are not necessarily limited to specific skill training programs. If one follows the dictates of common sense, it seems more logical for students to be vocationally assessed prior to choosing and participating in a program (though not to the exclusion of on-going assessment following enrollment in a vocational program). It seems assessment information would be more beneficial to vocational instructors if they have time to plan accommodations prior to a student experiencing frustration, embarrassment or failure in the vocational classroom. In the short term, assessing from a limited pool of students may be more manageable and may save money, but in the long term is this approach cost effective when considering the time spent with students and instructors struggling for mutual success?

This approach, though a popular one, also seems to violate the intent of the equity and quality assurances in the vocational education act when it states "equal access will be provided to handicapped and disadvantaged individuals in recruitment, enrollment and placement activities."

One must ask what happens to the handicapped and disadvantaged students who, not enrolled in vocational education, may never gain entrance because they will not be assessed. Often, vocational assessment activities ignite a latent interest, provide enough confidence or improved self-esteem which motivates students to apply for vocational programs, or enlists those conducting vocational assessment as advocates for the students who, in turn, facilitate acceptance into appropriate, desired vocational programs (Neubert, 1985).

Further evidence seems to favor assessment prior to placement in programs when one considers the phrase "with respect to completing successfully the vocational education program." How can we maximize success if we are not apprised of a vocational profile based on assessment data which includes interest, abilities, and needs prior to enrollment in vocational education?

How To Meet the Mandate

The following outline does not present any new ideas, but it should provoke some thought among those individuals who are responsible for implementing the Perkins Act and should reinforce the notion that if practitioners with training and experience in vocational assessment or evaluation are available they should provide expert input and knowledgeable direction toward compliance. Again, when identifying needs and and resources planners should assess the community outside the school system in addition to those which are delineated and available within the system. Collaboration among "disciplines" will prove the most beneficial and cost effective in the long run.

Developing a Vocational Assessment Process

- I Identify key personnel within
 - o administration
 - o vocational education
 - o special education
 - o guidance
 - o support staff
 - o vocational evaluators/assessment specialists
 - o outside/community agencies
- II Assess what exists -- what you have already (within and outside the school system)
 - o what resources exist currently
 - o when existing assessments are conducted
 - o who assesses and who is assessed
 - o when assessment takes place
 - o how the information is used
- III Assess needs and priorities -- what you want to have
 - o what can be afforded
 - o where funds will be expended: for personnel and/or instruments
 - o what assessment aspects are most critical for the local system
- IV Compare what you have with what "should be"
 - o what is required
 - o describe the ideal - optional services desired
 - o decide what can be accomplished realistically
 - o plan how to implement the process

- V Implement plan
 - o agree upon a process that will serve as a structure for all vocational assessment
 - o define roles of key players (personnel)
 - o assign and agree upon responsibilities for each role
 - o ensure that all participants know the specific roles and responsibilities of each other
- VI Establish time frames for each phase of implementation
- VII Provide in-service training for all key players and others who are required to collect assessment information:
 - o purpose and value of assessment
 - o explanation of the process
 - o their roles and responsibilities
 - o "how to" collect vocational assessment data
 - o recommended classroom based activities and use of curriculum-based assessment
 - o "how to" interpret information
 - o the components of a vocational profile
 - o "how to" integrate assessment findings and recommendations into individual educational plans and vocational programs
 - o referral criteria for further, more in-depth vocational assessment and evaluation
- VIII Evaluate the process at predetermined checkpoints
- IX Refine and alter the process based on program evaluation results

A factor which is often overlooked concerns the part or importance people play in implementing viable vocational assessment process. Attention also should be given to the populations to be served, their needs, abilities, potentials and how they will interact with vocational environments. Equally as critical, the professionals who are responsible for these students should be appraised regarding what they can/should do, who can or should be responsible for the various "pieces" of a total assessment process, and what training do they need to be successful. Without initial and on-going training and administrative support vocational assessment will not reap the benefits or outcomes which were intended. It is essential that an administrator be assigned responsibility for overseeing vocational assessment activities, only then will pre-assessment, actual assessment, and post-assessment activities be "bought into" by staff and effectively implemented.

Many discussions in our field have centered around instrumentation, models of vocational assessment, which type of assessment is best, etc. These issues should be addressed, but they should be dealt with by focusing on the people involved and the roles they can play. Taking time now to carefully plan a systematic process which can be integrated into the total educational system, will satisfy compliance monitors in the future.

In order to develop a truly collaborative, process that promotes integration into the career development and vocational preparation of handicapped and disadvantaged individuals, an interactive process must be ongoing among professionals. And, of course, good vocational

assessment encourages and relies on constant interaction between professionals and the students who are being assessed.

Essential Components of Vocational Assessment

Regardless of the format or model used -- curriculum-based vocational assessment, vocational evaluation center/unit, a combination of classroom-based assessment and formal, time-limited vocational evaluation, certain essential components must be included in the development of a vocational profile which can be used for career planning and subsequent vocational preparation.

These components, in general terms, are

- o background information (academic, medical, and physical, cultural, values),
- o learning styles, worker styles preferences (temperaments, environment),
- o worker characteristics (traits, employability skills, readiness),
- o work and social behaviors,
- o aptitudes,
- o interests,
- o vocational skills (specific, transferable, avocational).

Many states are directing local educational agencies to establish a "phase" process (Texas, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Georgia) which can provide basic on-going assessment information to a large number of students and a more indepth, comprehensive, time limited vocational evaluation for those students who have been identified as needing more information before career planning, individualized prescriptions, and vocational preparation recommendations can be made. The essential components listed previously cross over and are included in both phases of assessment.

The phases are distinguished by where the assessment occurs and by who conducts the assessment. (Some states delineate two phases, others identify three. For the purposes of brevity two phases are described in this article). Phase One is typically conducted in students' "natural" environments: classroom, home, leisure settings. Assessment information is collected by special education teachers, guidance counselors, vocational instructors, parents, etc. All handicapped and disadvantaged students should participate in Phase One. The developing concept of curriculum-based vocational assessment can serve as an integral part of Phase One. A function of this phase serves to identify those students who would be referred for Phase Two: those who need special adaptations or a more concentrated focus on vocational assessment activities. Services provided in this phase are coordinated and conducted by a trained vocational evaluator. The comprehensive vocational profile which is developed is formed by observing, assimilating, and interpreting students' performances on various "hands-on" work samples, psychometric testing, situational assessments, and job tryouts or shop explorations.

Examples of successful linkage between assessment and instruction as well as the effective integration of vocational assessment into the larger education program can be found in various states. Maryland, Georgia, and

Missouri have developed supplemental service programs which include vocational evaluation, assessment and support. This paradigm ties vocational evaluation is directly to instruction. Support staff can participate in assessment activities but primarily they provide whatever service or instructional assistance is needed for success in vocational programs. In Maryland, the Vocational Support Service Team is comprised of two components: vocational evaluation and vocational support. Vocational evaluation focuses on identifying vocational interests, aptitudes, skills, and potentials for training and employment. Vocational support assists students in acquiring the knowledge, skills, and behaviors required for success in vocational training and employment (Cobb & Kingsbury, 1985). Vocational support staff can also perform "spot-check" assessments in an effort to identify reasons for difficulties being experienced in vocational programs or for determining the need to refer students for a complete vocational evaluation (Maryland State Department of Education, 1984).

Further Development and Proactivity

The field of professional activity labeled vocational assessment and vocational evaluation is experiencing a "spurt" in its development and growth. The activities, processes, and formats for providing vocational assessment services are being analyzed, defined, and developed. It is the responsibility of those with experience and training in vocational assessment, particularly practitioners, to provide input into this developmental stage in the profession's growth. For instance, if they have not done so already, far too many local education agency decision-makers are resorting to the purchase of "one-stop, quick-fix" purported anodynes to satisfy the assessment mandate. Most of these instruments or packaged systems are expensive and are not suited to the real and unique needs of students targeted for vocational assessment nor is the information elicited that which is most critical and required by educational and training personnel. These systems may have value for specific purposes, but they need to be customized to fit into the curriculum and competencies required in vocational education. If the intent of the Perkins Vocational Education Act is to be achieved, we in vocational evaluation must work with other professionals to improve the career development, vocational preparation, and quality of life for handicapped and disadvantaged students.

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