Community Conversations Can Bring Diverse Stakeholders Together to Build Consensus

People with disabilities and the professionals who support them have knowledge and experience that could be valuable to communities in addressing disability-related issues. However, when communities come together to work on these issues, some stakeholders may be left out of the discussion. A recent NIDILRR-funded study used a well-established community conversation format (World Café) as a way to bring more underrepresented voices into the discussion. Specifically, they wanted to see whether bringing diverse stakeholders together in a community conversation forum could help to foster dialogue and encourage consensus building and action around important issues like increasing employment opportunity for young adults with disabilities.

Researchers from Project Work Opportunity Through Resource and Capacity Building (Project WORC) organized three community conversations to identify existing and needed employment resources for youth with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). Each community conversation included a group of about 15 people from different backgrounds who had an interest in improving employment opportunities for youth with EBD. The participants included teachers and administrators at local high schools, vocational rehabilitation staff, allied health professionals, local employers, students with disabilities, and their parents. A total of 52 people from 38 organizations participated across the three community conversations.

The community conversations were set up to encourage focused dialogue and free sharing of ideas. The conversation format was modeled after the World Café, an approach to strategic dialogue and collaboration across cultures. Each community conversation followed a standard format. After a large group introduction, participants were seated at round tables with 5-6 people per table. Each table had a host who welcomed the participants, facilitated dialogue, and took notes on the discussions. All participants began by discussing the question, “What can our community do to increase summer employment opportunities for youth with EBD?” Hosts continued the discussion by asking follow-up questions about ways to better include youth with disabilities in community activities and to build collaborations between high schools and local employers. The participants engaged in three rounds of small group conversation, each lasting 15-20 minutes. Between rounds, the participants moved to different tables, so that each participant conversed with up to 15 people in total. After the third round, all 52 participants came together for a large group brainstorming session called the “harvest.” During the harvest, the group pooled the best ideas gathered during the small group discussions. Participants identified common patterns and insights linking the ideas
together into themes, which they recorded on flipcharts as a summary of their conversation.

Based on their observation of the community conversations and the harvest results, the researchers suggested that the community conversations could offer participants a supportive and collaborative forum to identify priorities and action steps that could be endorsed by the community. Specifically, the community conversation format:

- Fostered diversity and collaboration: Each community conversation brought people together from diverse backgrounds, including people with disabilities, to work toward a shared purpose of improving employment for youth with EBD.
- Encouraged sharing of ideas: The conversations were set up so that all opinions and suggestions were valued, including the voices of potentially marginalized people.
- Supported consensus building: The conversation format encouraged participants to think critically and the harvest helped build consensus on specific action steps.

According to the authors, these conversations resulted in concrete ideas and recommended action steps in the areas of employer-focused vocational rehabilitation, job skills training for youth, and connecting existing community-based resources.

The authors noted that community conversation approach may be a useful, innovative tool for finding solutions to complex social problems, such as increasing employment for youth with disabilities. Combining input from multiple stakeholder perspectives could aid communities and policymakers in thinking critically about issues, uniting resources, and generating innovative and community-approved action plans. Researchers may wish to further explore what happens after the conversations, as communities turn those action plans into reality.

To Learn More
Public/private partnerships: A model for success, published in 2004 by the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Workplace Supports, presents a template for developing mutually beneficial partnerships between private sector businesses and the public vocational rehabilitation sector. This document is available from the NARIC collection under accession number O15438.

Project TEAM, developed under a NIDILRR field initiated grant, is a facilitated program that helps teens with intellectual and developmental disabilities to become strong self advocates. Learn more about the program and how to request a copy of the curriculum.

Self Advocates Becoming Empowered (SABE) supports people with disabilities in learning about their rights and responsibilities and in advocating for full inclusion in their communities.
The World Café Community Foundation has information and resources for hosting a community conversation: [http://www.theworldcafe.com/](http://www.theworldcafe.com/)

**To Learn More About this Study**


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