



DRUM BEATS: FACT SHEETS

Characteristics of Effective Vocational Rehabilitation Programs

Each American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services (AIVRS) program is unique because of their community’s traditions, history, established institutions, physical location, and economic strengths and/or weaknesses. AIVRS programs continue to progress toward their goals of assisting greater numbers of American Indians with disabilities to obtain and sustain their employment. Continual success comes with perseverance and direction. This Fact Sheet is designed to assist the AIVRS programs with direction. Regardless of where each AIVRS program is in their journey, there is a set of characteristics that each can strive to embody.

To the extent possible, the information included in this Fact Sheet was gleaned from research conducted with AIVRS programs; however, where there is limited information, it is supplemented with findings from various state VR programs about what makes a VR program effective. All content was drawn from the references in the reference section. Because there are few articles that describe characteristics of effective AIVRS programs specifically, the characteristics presented in this Fact Sheet should be considered provisional and warrant further exploration as they relate to AIVRS programs. For now, the following eight characteristics can serve as a guide for AIVRS programs as they continue to progress toward their goals.

- Strong Leadership
- Responsiveness to Consumer and Culture
- Innovation in Removing Barriers
- Collaboration Among AIVRS Staff
- Coordination with Community Agencies
- Outcome-focused, Data-based Decision Making
- Extensive On-going Professional Development
- Support from Tribal Leadership

Strong Leadership

Interviews with ten AIVRS programs resulted in an understanding of what strong leadership means. The respondents described strong and effective leaders as passionate, visionary, committed, and consistent. Leaders with clear goals and who communicate their expectations well, but who are also supportive of new ideas and accessible were considered most effective at leading VR staff. Strong leaders engage staff at all levels of decisions and cultivate creativity and open communication.

Responsiveness to Consumer and Culture

AIVRS programs that infuse a philosophy of consumer-centered services are prepared to accept each consumer as an individual and properly respond to his or her unique needs. Rather than approaching services from an authoritative or bureaucratic perspective, VR Counselors who spend time understanding individual consumers holistically, including their values, religious beliefs, customs, needs, and career interests are most effective. Although culture can be described in reference to a group of people, each person experiences his or her culture differently. Therefore, a superficial understanding of a group’s



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About the Institute

The Institute for Human Development is a research and training program located on Northern Arizona University. Our program is part of a national network of University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD). In Arizona, we are designated as one of two Arizona University Centers on Disabilities (AzUCD).

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culture is not sufficient and could be misleading. A deeper knowledge of how a consumer's cultural experiences have shaped his or her current thinking is needed. It is essential that VR Counselors develop a personal relationship with each of their consumers and to facilitate a planning partnership. Vocational planning does not require a doctor-patient relationship, but a reverent alliance.

Innovation in Removing Barriers

Programs that foster thinking outside the box can more effectively eliminate barriers to gainful employment. Barriers may be all that some people see; however, the job of a VR Counselor is to show families and the larger population the strengths of their consumers. When leaders encourage staff autonomy and innovation, AIVRS staff can collectively generate ideas and strategies to raise awareness, break down barriers, educate the community and potential employers, reshape services, create entrepreneurship opportunities, and promote self-advocacy. Innovation requires creativity, flexibility, and willingness to take risks.

Collaboration Among Staff

AIVRS programs have reported the value of teamwork in the workplace. When staff members work together as a team they are effective and the outcomes for consumers improve. All staff should work together toward a common goal, as well as plan together, learn together, make decisions together, and share successes with each other. Case management systems and coordination are a vital part of collaborative teams and team meetings should be consistent and scheduled regularly. Strong leaders can nurture collaboration by designing cooperative learning opportunities among staff, since each staff person is a member of the community of practice. To achieve synergistic benefits, each VR Counselor's strengths should be noticed and explicitly valued and in turn, each VR Counselor should contribute his or her strengths for the benefit of the team and their consumers.

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Coordination with Community Agencies

Successful AIVRS programs coordinate services with other agencies in the community such as other tribal programs, State VR programs, Veterans Administration, consumer or advocacy organizations, employers, community-based rehabilitation programs, mental health organizations, and community colleges and universities. Program staff members need to work collaboratively to build bridges to non-tribal resources as well as within the tribe. Strategic planning with a goal toward developing personal relationships with key stakeholders in the community will improve the efficiency of service coordination for consumers.

Outcome-focused, Data-based Decision Making

When AIVRS programs are outcome focused, it means that they have clear, measureable goals and work toward them diligently while monitoring their progress toward the goals. Effective programs use data to inform decisions and measure successes. Every staff member should be educated in an AIVRS data entry system, and data entry must be consistently documented. Data can include a number of things that are typically measured in AIVRS programs such as number of consumers in an individualized plan for employment (IPE), type of services provided in each fiscal year, disability type, number of consumers achieving gainful employment, timeline of employment, time sustained in employment, number of counseling sessions, number of job trainings, etc. The important thing is that this information is summarized for regular reporting (e.g., monthly, quarterly, annual performance reports for RSA) and shared with

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the entire staff and the tribal council. Staff members need to see the results of their hard work and collectively refocus their aims based on relevant data.

Extensive Ongoing Professional Development

Professional development is about furthering the competence, skill, and expertise of VR professionals. This is often done through workshops or presentations, but it can also include webinars, communities of practice, coaching with feedback, and college courses. There is a shortage of trained tribal VR Counselors. For that reason, extensive on-the-job training may be needed for AIVRS staff. Effective programs report that staff members attend about seven trainings a year on topics such as specific disabilities, counseling skills, and VR laws and regulations. In collaboration with supervisors, VR Counselors should be encouraged to identify their own professional needs and request training topics based on the needs of their current consumers. Professional development opportunities are available to AIVRS program staff through the Northwest Indian College Tribal VR Institute, located in Bellingham, WA. More information about these opportunities can be found at www.nwic.edu/tvr-institute

Support from Tribal Leadership

Effective AIVRS programs have strong working relationships with Tribal Council and Finance. Not everyone within the tribal community has a clear understanding of the needs of individuals with disabilities or the services they may be eligible to receive to prepare for viable employment. However, when tribal leadership is involved, policies and procedures will more likely be designed to assist the AIVRS programs and the tribal members with disabilities. Leadership support looks differently across tribes so it is up to the local AIVRS leaders and VR Counselors to develop relationships with their tribal councils. They should help educate the council on the program's goals and support needs to provide culturally appropriate and responsive services for tribal consumers.

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