Inclusion

Professionals need information too: Exploratory data from the Family Employment Awareness Training (FEAT) in Kansas

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Corresponding Author:	Judith M.S. Gross, PhD Indiana University Bloomington, IN UNITED STATES
First Author:	Judith M.S. Gross, PhD
Order of Authors:	Judith M.S. Gross, PhD
	Grace L. Francis, PhD
	Jeong Hoon Choi, PhD
	Jared L Stanley, PhD
	Ellie Bowen, MEd
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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Abstract

For this exploratory study we investigated the perceptions of professionals who attended Family Employment Awareness Training (FEAT), a family-focused training about competitive employment for people with disabilities. We used a pre-/post-survey design with matched respondents. We used repeated measures ANOVA, descriptive statistics, and basic interpretive qualitative analysis to analyze data. Results indicated that participants significantly improved their general expectations for the job prospects and abilities of people with disabilities and, while not statistically significant, increased their knowledge of employment resources. Participants became more confident that they could use their knowledge to address barriers to employment. They reported accessing employment resources, professional barriers they experienced, and their perceptions of FEAT. Results indicated that attending FEAT can positively influence expectations for and knowledge of competitive employment. Results also indicated that professionals found attending FEAT worthwhile and that it improved professional confidence in addressing barriers.

Keywords: competitive integrated employment, disability professional, family training, family expectations, transition to adulthood

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Integrated and competitive employment, working in the community for minimum wage or higher, is an expected outcome for young adults following graduation (Guillermo et al., 2021). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) supports this outcome for students with disabilities through transition planning as a part of a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), starting no later than the school year in which the student turns 16. Transition IEPs include (a) instruction, (b) related services, (c) community experiences, (d) employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and (e) if appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and provide for a functional vocational evaluation (IDEA § 300.43, 2004). In addition to IDEA, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014) expanded vocational rehabilitation services to eligible students through Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). As a result of WIOA, each state must dedicate at least 15% of Title I vocational rehabilitation funds to implement statewide Pre-ETS which include job exploration counseling, postsecondary education opportunities counseling, work readiness training, work-based learning, and self-advocacy training. Despite this legislation, competitive employment continues to elude many young adults with disabilities following graduation (Mazzotti et al., 2020; Shogren & Ward, 2018).

Collaboration among key invested parties (e.g., young adults, family members, educators, vocational rehabilitation and other community service professionals) is important to support the attainment of competitive employment among young adults with disabilities (Hirano & Rowe, 2015; Wehman et al., 2021). Both IDEA and WIOA call for collaboration among Individualized Education Program (IEP) team members (e.g., student, family, educators, and community service

professionals) to discuss the young adult's interests, strengths, and support needs as a driving factor for employment goals, resources, and opportunities (Cavendish & Connor, 2018; IDEA § 1401(34), 2004). WIOA states that state vocational rehabilitation staff or vendors should collaborate with local education agencies to provide Pre-ETS services to transition-age youth to supplement (not supplant) school-provided transition services and activities (2014). Although collaboration among invested parties is required during the transition from high school to adulthood, such collaboration does not always come to fruition (Roux et al., 2020, Sprunger et al., 2018).

Many factors negatively impact collaboration efforts including uncertainty on how to collaborate (Hirano & Rowe, 2015; IRIS Center, 2019; Poirier et al., 2022), low expectations among professionals for competitive employment (Hirano et al., 2018), and limited transition-related knowledge among invested parties (Francis et al., 2014; Simonsen et al., 2018). Education professionals influence family and student expectations for postsecondary outcomes by sharing information, preparing students with transition-related skills, and implementing transition goals (Gross et al., 2021). Therefore, maintaining high expectations and knowledge among both education and service professionals is critical to the successful transition of youth with disabilities.

Unfortunately, however, research indicates that educators and family members are not adequately prepared to navigate transition conversations (Miller-Warren, 2017). For example, despite acknowledging the importance of community employment resources and support, special educators report a lack of knowledge and use of available resources (Sprunger et al., 2018). Further, higher education teacher preparation programs provide little to no preparation for facilitating IEP meetings with the level of depth that IDEA calls for (Morningstar & Mazzotti,

2014). For example, according to Virginia Commonwealth Universities undergraduate program catalog, bachelor level teacher candidates only briefly cover transition in a two--credit hour field supervision out of their required 123 credit hours for a K-12 special education certification (Virginia Commonwealth University, 2024n.d.). Therefore, professional development for special educators falls on school districts to prepare teachers in transition-related content (e.g., community resources, local job/vocational opportunities, state-based age of majority laws). Other professionals such as vocational rehabilitation counselors also report a lack of knowledge about available employment resources (McKnight et. al, 2022), and vocational rehabilitation counselors and educators alike report uncertainty in understanding one another's transition roles and responsibilities (Plotner et al., 2020). In the same vein, educators suggest that the differences between school-based IDEA and WIOA can complicate collaboration (McKnight et. al, 2022).

In addition, IDEA does not require educators to provide families of students with disabilities training on transition or the age of majority (Francis & Stanley, 2022). As a failsafe, IDEA requires school districts to provide transition service information no later than the sixteenth birthday and to formally notify parents of age of majority one year prior to their eighteenth birthday (IDEA § 1414(d), 2004). However, this notice can be as lax as providing a website with information and sending home a letter to parents on the student's 16th birthday (Escambia County School District, 2024n.d.; Morehouse Parish School Board, 2008n.d.). Such communication can be a barrier in school districts with high populations of poverty (e.g., access to technology, ability to participate in meetings), high levels of transiency (e.g., inconsistent information), and high levels of english language learners (e.g., access to information in a language they understand). Therefore, if educators are not providing parents with adequate

information, families may be making ill-informed decisions about their student's future as Miller-Warren (2017) suggests.

To address this lack of knowledge among all key stakeholders, states have begun to use funds available through policies (e.g., IDEA, WIOA) and state agencies (e.g., Developmental Disabilities Councils, Vocational Rehabilitation) to train IEP team members (e.g., student, family, educators, and community service professionals) about integrated and competitive employment for people with disabilities. Family Employment Awareness Training (FEAT) is an example of such a training which focuses on building the expectations and knowledge of families and youth in the transition from school to integrated competitive employment (Gross et al., 2021).

Family Employment Awareness Training (FEAT)

FEAT was designed to help families develop expectations for the competitive employment of their family member with a disability and gain knowledge about resources to support attaining and maintaining employment. FEAT is a two-part face-to-face training that addresses multiple topics, including: customized employment options (e.g., carved, created, business within a business, self-employment, resource ownership), family role in supporting transition to employment, transition in education and healthcare, resources for employees and employers, anti-discrimination laws and self-advocacy, and available funding and services (Gross et al., 2015). The training also includes action-orientated activities and afternoon sessions with local entrepreneurs, employers, employees with disabilities, and service providers who present information to and dialogue with participants. See Table 1 for additional information about FEAT.

Collectively, persons who attended FEAT in 2010-2012 indicated that, following FEAT, they had increased expectations and improved knowledge, accessed resources, and used FEAT materials (Francis et al., 2013). Further, nearly 70% of attendees reported that FEAT positively influenced how they supported their family members with disabilities to attain and/or maintain employment. Families who attended FEAT between 2013-2016 indicated that FEAT improved their expectations and knowledge, with perceptions of improved knowledge lasting at least a year following training. Participating families also overwhelmingly agreed that FEAT positively influenced how they sought out and accessed resources. In addition, learning this information empowered families in addressing and overcoming barriers to help their family members seek employment (Francis et al., 2022).

Since FEAT was designed for and marketed to families of youth in transition via school districts and parent training and information centers, we were surprised by the number of professionals (e.g., case managers, special educators, community rehabilitation providers) who attended a state-wide FEAT series in Kansas in 2013-2016. The objective of this exploratory study was to investigate the perceptions of the professionals who attended FEAT in Kansas and completed pre- and post-surveys. Research questions included:

(a) Did professionals indicate that FEAT influenced their expectations for competitive employment for individuals with disabilities? (quantitative)

(b) Did professionals indicate that FEAT influenced their knowledge of employment resources? (quantitative)

(c) Did professionals indicate that FEAT influenced their confidence that knowledge can mitigate barriers to employment? (quantitative)

(d) Did professionals use different resources after attending FEAT? (quantitative)

(e) Did professionals identify different primary barriers to competitive employment after attending FEAT? (quantitative)

(f) What were professionals' perceptions of the effectiveness of FEAT? (qualitative)

It was hypothesized that attending FEAT would lead to improvements in professionals' expectations, knowledge, confidence, and utilization of resources for facilitating competitive employment for individuals with disabilities. Additionally, it was predicted that professionals would perceive a change in barriers and recognize the impact of FEAT.

Methods

In this manuscript, we report on the survey results of professionals who attended FEAT during a three-year study (2013-2016) of its effectiveness. We used a pre- and post-survey design with matched responses, collecting completed surveys from training attendees prior to the start of the training and by mail at one-year post-FEAT. We used repeated measures ANOVA, descriptive statistics, and basic interpretive qualitative analysis to analyze the survey data. All research was approved by the university Institutional Review Board prior to recruitment.

Participants

Sixty-five professionals (N = 65) who attended FEAT completed a pre-survey (i.e., Community Employment Survey; Gross & Francis, 2015); however, less than half (n = 30) completed a one-year post-survey. We analyzed the resulting 30 matched pre/post surveys for reporting in this manuscript. Among these, 77% of participants (n = 23) were new to the FEAT training and 23% (n = 7) had attended a previous FEAT training prior to participation in this research. Since FEAT targets families and youth with disabilities for participation, we did not anticipate professionals to attend FEAT. For this reason, we did not design the survey to capture detailed demographic information for professionals.

However, we did collect information about professional roles via the "other" text fill-in box on the survey question regarding the role of the participant and in field notes collected during introductions and activities at FEAT events. These data indicated that the roles of the professionals who attended FEAT included special education teachers, case managers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, transition specialists, job coaches, benefits specialists, a special education director, special education paraprofessionals, employment specialists, a Medicaid managed care organization representative, and a service provider for aging adults with disabilities. In instances that participants held both the role of family member (e.g., parent of a child with a disability) and professional in the disability field, we asked the participants to complete the survey as a family member, since that was the original target population for this research. Therefore, the data analyzed for this study reflects the survey respondents who identified themselves as professionals in the disability field.

Recruitment

We collaborated with the state's Parent Training and Information (PTI) Center to market FEAT via their newsletter, website, and at in-person events with families and youth. The PTI email list consisted of both families and professionals in the field of disability, which is likely one way that professionals became aware of the training and subsequently attended. We also marketed FEAT to families and students with disabilities via special education administrators and educators in the communities in which FEAT was held. This is another way that professionals, special educators in particular, became aware of and subsequently attended FEAT. Finally, a portion of the FEAT curriculum (Part 2) includes inviting professionals from the community to speak about their services, which is another way that some professionals may have become aware of FEAT and subsequently chose to attend an entire training and participate in the

research. Professionals' participation in FEAT was a byproduct of recruiting our target audience, families and youth with disabilities.

Data Collection

Survey Distribution

We asked all attendees to complete a pre-survey prior to the FEAT training; therefore, data from the professionals who attended were captured alongside data from family and youth attendees. All FEAT attendees who completed a pre-survey were subsequently sent a post-survey in the mail to the address provided on the pre-survey. We made a total of four attempts over a six week period to solicit post-survey responses. First, we sent an introduction letter telling them about the purpose of the study and to expect a survey in the mail. Next, we mailed a postmarked return envelope and a paper copy of the survey with a $2.00 bill incentive taped to the front of the survey. After a couple of weeks, we sent a reminder postcard to those who had not yet returned a survey. Lastly, we sent an additional survey with a postmarked return envelope. Survey completion served as consent for this exploratory research.

Survey Description

The Community Employment Survey is a valid and reliable instrument designed to measure outcomes among FEAT participants (Gross & Francis, 2015). The Community Employment Survey includes pre and post versions of the survey. It has a total of 54 questions related to expectations for competitive employment, knowledge of resources to support employment, perceived barriers to employment, state and federal employment resources used, current employment status, and general demographics aimed at families and young adults with disabilities (e.g., age, household income, family member's disability). The survey included the following constructs and question types:

(1) a six-question expectations subscale (Expectation 1 in Figure 1) measuring respondents' general beliefs and expectations that individuals with disabilities have competitive employment opportunities and can work with appropriate support in the community,

(2) a four-question matrix (Expectation 2 in Figure 1) measuring respondents' expectations for the competitive employment of individuals with disabilities based on the intensity of their support needs (e.g., needs workplace support an average of 1-2 times a month, 1-2 times a week, daily, or does not need supports),

(3) a six-question knowledge subscale measuring respondents' perceptions of their knowledge about the resources available to support employment of people with disabilities,

(4) a six-question knowledge mitigates barriers/confidence subscale measuring respondents' perceptions regarding the degree to which they believe that knowledge can mitigate barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities,

(5) a checklist of barriers to competitive employment consisting of 28 commonly reported barriers (e.g., poor economy, discrimination, low expectations, lack of transportation),

(6) a checklist of state and federal employment-related resources that respondents have accessed,

(7) two multiple choice questions related to respondents' use of and perceptions of FEAT technical assistance following FEAT attendance (post-survey only),

(8) 12 multiple choice questions related to respondents' perceptions of the effectiveness of FEAT (post-survey only), and

(9) two open-ended questions, one related to a respondents' experiences regarding competitive employment and individuals with disabilities and one regarding suggestions for FEAT (post-survey only).

In the development of the Community Employment Survey (Gross & Francis, 2015), we conducted cognitive interviews with individuals who represented our target audience (i.e., people with a disability, family members of a person with a disability, professionals) but who were not familiar with FEAT to ensure survey construct and content validity. During field testing of the survey, we gathered 150 responses to the Community Employment Survey which were used to assess the reliability of the subscales (i.e., expectations, knowledge, and knowledge mitigates barriers/confidence). The internal consistency analysis results for the subscales of the Community Employment Survey indicated the following for each subscale: (a) expectations, coefficient alpha of 0.823; (b) knowledge, coefficient alpha of 0.872; and (c) knowledge mitigates barriers/confidence, coefficient alpha of 0.822.

Data Analysis

We conducted a repeated measures ANOVA to examine improvements in participants perceptions regarding (1) general expectations for competitive employment for people with disabilities (Expectation 1 in Figure 1), (2) expectations for employment for people with varied levels of support needs (Expectation 2 in Figure 1), (3) knowledge of employment resources, and (4) confidence that knowledge can mitigate barriers to achieving competitive employment. In the analysis, time (i.e., survey administration time) served as a within-subject factor, and the three subscales and four-question matrix of the Community Employment Survey separately served as a dependent variable. We used descriptive statistics to compare changes in participants' resource

use, perceived barriers to employment, perceptions of FEAT, and use of technical assistance following attending the FEAT training.

We used basic qualitative interpretative analysis (Merriam, 2009) to analyze two open-ended questions on the survey: (1) "Do you have any additional information (positive or negative) you would like to share about your experiences working with individuals with disabilities as they are transitioning out of school, seeking employment, and/or working?" and (2) "Do you have anything to add about your experiences with FEAT?" (post-survey only). Two researchers met to identify and define general themes that emerged from the data with regard to what participants liked, disliked, and recommended to improve FEAT. We used peer debriefing to support the trustworthiness of the analysis.

Results

The results of the repeated measures ANOVA analyses of data from the Community Employment Survey showed that professional participants significantly improved their general expectations for the competitive employment of people with disabilities (i.e., Expectation 1). Participants also reported increased knowledge of employment resources and became more confident in their belief that they can use their knowledge to address barriers to employment for people with disabilities. However, those improvements were not statistically significant. The expectations for competitive employment for individuals with varied levels of support needs (i.e., Expectation 2) showed a slight deterioration, with no significant change. These response changes are depicted in Figure 1.

Expectations (Expectation 1 & 2)

We examined participants' expectations for competitive employment among people with disabilities through two forms of measurement on the Community Employment Survey. The

first expectation subscale, labeled as "Expectation 1" in Figure 1, assessed the general beliefs and expectations of respondents regarding the employment opportunities and capabilities of individuals with disabilities to work in the community with appropriate support. The results showed a significant positive change in beliefs and expectations from the pre-survey completed before FEAT ($M = 15.73$, $SD = 4.16$) to the post-survey conducted one year later ($M = 13.27$, $SD = 4.49$), $F\ (1, 29) = 6.46$, $p < 0.05$.

The second measurement of professionals' expectations for the employment of people with disabilities ("Expectation 2" on Figure 1) was a four-question matrix measuring respondents' competitive employment expectations for individuals with varied levels of support needs. This matrix asked about expectations for competitive employment (i.e., high - can get jobs in my community, average - somewhat likely to get jobs in my community, low - cannot get jobs in my community) based on the intensity of support needs of individuals with disabilities (i.e., need workplace support daily, an average of 1-2 times a week, an average of 1-2 times a month, or do not need workplace support). The analysis showed that the expectations for people with disabilities to attain community employment when related to the intensity of the support needs of people with disabilities actually declined a bit, though it was not a statistically significant change from pre- to post-survey, $F\ (1, 28) = 0.73$, $p = 0.40$. In both the pre- and post-surveys, respondents reported their perceptions regarding the employability of people with disabilities across the matrix, with lower expectations for job attainment associated with more intense support needs (i.e., weekly or daily support) and higher expectations for job attainment associated with lower support needs (i.e., monthly or none at all). Attendance at FEAT did not change this perception.

Knowledge

Participants reported that their perception of their knowledge about resources to support employment of people with disabilities improved from the pre-survey (M = 10.47, SD = 3.58) to the post-survey (M = 9.37, SD = 3.10). In the post-survey, participants reported having increased knowledge about how to access employment resources, programs, services, and supports. However, this increase was not statistically significant, F (1, 29) = 2.80, p = 0.11.

Confidence That Knowledge Mitigates Barriers

Participants responded positively toward the belief that having enhanced knowledge about employment resources can help them to overcome barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities (pre-survey: M = 12.77, SD = 2.71, post-survey: M = 11.9, SD = 2.66). However, the subscale score change was insufficient for statistical significance, F (1, 29) = 2.68, p = 0.11.

Resources Accessed

On the Community Employment Survey, respondents were asked to select all of the 24 resources listed that they had accessed or used within the last year (see Table 2). On both the pre-surveys and post-surveys, respondents identified (1) case manager, (2) vocational rehabilitation, (3) job coaching services, and (4) natural supports in the workplace as the top four resources respondents accessed or used in the last year. Although these four resources were maintained in the from pre- to post-surveys, the proportions of participants who accessed three of those top-ranked resources within the last year (i.e., case manager, job coaching services, natural supports in the workplace) decreased. Reported use of case managers decreased by 13.3%, use of job coaching services decreased by 11.4% as did use of natural supports in the workplace. In contrast, reported access to and use of the Council on Developmental Disabilities increased by 13.4% and Project SEARCH, Plan for Achieving Self-Support (PASS), and ADA technical

assistance centers each increased 10% in the post-surveys (with ADA technical assistance centers previously at 0% in pre-survey data). This indicates a diversification of the resources used by respondents following FEAT. Table 2 depicts the difference between pre-survey and post-survey results for resources accessed and the proportion of participants who chose each resource.

Barriers

Respondents were asked to select the five most challenging barriers that they believed prevented or hindered employment for individuals with disabilities. The top five barriers respondents identified in the pre-survey were: (1) poor social skills (50%), (2) severity of disability or intensity of needs (33.3%), (3) need for extensive or ongoing supports at work and poor economy/job market (these two barriers were tied at 30%), (4) lack of transportation (26.7%), and (5) lack of education/training or work experience (23.3%). Four of these six total barriers are directly related to the individual with a disability.

The top barriers respondents identified in the post-survey were: (1) lack of transportation (36.7%); (2) severity of disability or intensity of needs (33.3%); (3) low expectations for employment from families (30%); (4) poor social skills, need for extensive or ongoing supports at work, lack of education/training or work experience, and low expectations for employment from society (these four barriers were tied at 26.7%); and (5) poor economy/job market, limited funding for employment services, and lack of information or misinformation about employment resources (these three barriers were tied at 20%). Of the ten total barriers identified, based on percentage, four of the ten were related to the individual with a disability and the same individual-focused barriers as identified in the pre-survey. However, in the post-survey, respondents identified a wider array of barriers to employment as their top five. The other six

barriers focused on either systems issues (i.e., transportation, poor economy/job market, limited funding for employment services, lack of information or misinformation about employment services) or expectations for employment of people with disabilities broadly.

Table 3 provides a list of barriers and associated proportions of participants in pre-surveys and post-surveys. Among the 26 barriers listed in the survey, "poor social skills" was the top barrier selected by 50% of participants in the pre-survey. The proportion of participants who selected "poor social skills" in the post-survey decreased to 26.7% dropping it from first to fourth in the top five . The proportions of participants who perceived "low motivation/self-determination" and "poor economy/job market" as barriers also decreased 10% or more.

In the pre-survey, 13.3% of participants reported "low expectations for employment from families" and that proportion of participants increased to 30% in the post-survey, making it rank third in the top five barriers reported post-survey. "Lack of information or misinformation about employment resources," "lack of transportation," and "low expectations for employment from society" also increased 10% or more as an identified barrier in the post-survey.

Barriers that participants wrote into the "other" option included: schools not focusing on vocational programs early enough, difficult job market in small communities, lack of accurate and early transition information for parents and students, families not wanting their child to work, age-requirements for work, lack of understanding of disability or an individual's abilities, inappropriate behavior or lack of maturity of the job-seeker.

Perceptions of FEAT

Analysis of open-ended post-survey responses revealed two primary themes: (a) participant needs and suggestions for FEAT and (b) satisfaction with FEAT.

Participant Needs and Suggestions for FEAT

Participants described many barriers that they continued to experience in spite of information learned during the training, including the "need [for] more resources" for students with significant disabilities such as those "on the autism spectrum" or with "cognitive delays." Although they were "very pleased with the training and the speakers," some participants also noted dissatisfaction with the actual services/resources they were accessing.

> I loved the FEAT training and having all the resources and knowledge come together. I do feel like often services are advertised one way but then when students graduate the reality is not as supportive. However, this may be more to the service provider than the organization itself.

Some participants also lamented that the "very long and hard process" to secure resources "often limits what the children/adults can do once they transition." One participant noted that "more follow-up services by FEAT" or a "follow-up contact or group brainstorming/sharing experiences type of meeting w/parents, professionals & people w/disabilities" may help them troubleshoot and "keep in contact with clients."

Participants also provided suggestions for FEAT, including ways in which the training is delivered. Suggestions included, "revisit[ing] and briefly explain[ing] all acronyms" and providing "more examples of steps [sic] to what parents/guardians would do while student is in school." Participants also desired information "specifically directed toward educators," saying "...I understood the FEAT is more for families, in helping them which is great! I would have liked more with employment services. The FEAT info was good!"

Satisfaction with FEAT

Participants also reported satisfaction with FEAT: "This is a fantastic training for families and professionals. I would highly recommend it to others." FEAT participants also described

aspects of the training they enjoyed: (a) “It is cost effective and presents a solid program,” (b) “I thought the wide range of speakers & information was excellent,” (c) “I really enjoyed the guest speakers,” (d) “Hand-outs are really effective!” (e) “Great networking connections,” and (f) “You can always call FEAT and they will give you direction if they can’t help you directly.” Participants indicated that the “timelines [FEAT provided] for our kids is important so they can get applications going or in order” and that the employment stories of the “students who have secured employment…were especially helpful” and “uplifting and encouraging.” One participant wrote, “I like when the trainings is positive and not pitting parents against the school. I also liked it was presented as a joint effort between both.” Finally, participants noted numerous benefits of attending FEAT. For example, one participant wrote, “It completely turned my thinking from ‘what can you do?’ to ‘what would you like to do, and let’s see how we can get there’.” While another participant believed that “the FEAT training encouraged me to pursue contact with employers in my community to look at potential job experiences.” Participants indicated that they felt more equipped to serve the individuals with whom they worked, especially those professionals who were “still new at the job.”

Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore the perceptions of professionals who attended FEAT in Kansas. The results of this study suggest that professional participants significantly improved their general expectations regarding competitive employment of people with disabilities. Participants also reported perceptions of increased knowledge of employment resources and increased confidence in their belief that they can use their knowledge to address barriers to employment for people with disabilities. However, those improvements were not statistically significant.

When we asked participants about their beliefs and expectations that individuals with disabilities have employment opportunities and can work with appropriate support in the community, there was a significant increase in their general expectations that people with disabilities could be employed (Expectation 1 in Figure 1). Respondents, however, maintained average perceptions regarding the employability of people with varying support needs (Expectation 2 in Figure 1); there was no significant change in these expectations. Responses on this expectation matrix indicated that FEAT participants believed that the more frequent the support needs of an individual on the job, the less likely the individual is to attain employment. FEAT did not improve their beliefs regarding the employability of all people, regardless of support needs. This aligns with current research indicating that service coordinators tend to have lower expectations for employment for people with moderate or severe disabilities (Whitney et al., 2021), but also indicates that FEAT positively influenced general expectations.

While data analysis showed an increase in perceptions of knowledge about employment resources and confidence in their ability to use their knowledge to address barriers to employment for people with disabilities, neither of those increases were statistically significant ($p = 0.11$). This is not surprising given that the professionals who attended FEAT were employed in positions where they provided guidance and support to young adults with disabilities and their families. Therefore, researchers expected that this group would have a higher baseline for all scales, making it harder to attain statistical significance. Despite this, research shows that professionals often do not have enough information or may be providers of misinformation due to a lack of adequate understanding of the many adult social services systems (U.S. GAO, 2012).

Although participants identified the same top four resources in both pre-surveys and post-surveys (i.e., case manager, vocational rehabilitation, job coaching services, and natural supports

in the workplace), they did show a small diversification of resources in the post-survey through the addition of the Workforce Development Centers, a non-disability support resource, to the most commonly used resources. Also in the post-survey, professionals reported increases in access to and use of the Council on Developmental Disabilities, Project SEARCH, Plan for Achieving Self-Support (PASS), and ADA technical assistance centers - each of which increased by 10% or more. Although we have no data connecting professional role type to resources used, it is to be expected that the role the professional held would impact the resources that they most commonly used. For example, many attending professionals held the roles of case manager, vocational rehabilitation counselor, and job coach/employment specialist, so it is not surprising that case manager, vocational rehabilitation, and job coaching services were in the top resources, along with natural supports which are a common employment support strategy used by these service providers. However, the diversification of resources that professionals accessed following FEAT attendance is encouraging and may likely be a result of increased knowledge of other available services and supports.

Relatedly, there was a slight shift in the identification of barriers in pre-surveys to post-surveys. Pre-survey results indicated a higher emphasis on barriers that are internal to the job seeker (i.e., low motivation/self-determination, poor social skills), with the post-surveys noting an increase in barriers that are external to the person with a disability (e.g., low expectations for employment from society, lack of transportation, low expectations from family). The increased number of participants who identified low expectations across families and society/employers as a primary barrier is of interest, as this may be a result of a critical consciousness participants gained during FEAT.

Finally, although participants reported dissatisfaction with experiences attempting to access resources following FEAT, they overwhelmingly expressed an appreciation for FEAT, providing recommendations for future FEAT sessions geared toward those serving in professional roles. This finding is encouraging as FEAT may serve as a mechanism for simultaneously enhancing professional development, family training, and IEP team coordination and collaboration, consistent with IDEA and WIOA mandates.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the results of this research which resulted in both frame errors and response errors with the unexpected attendance of FEAT by professionals (McNabb, 2014). First, the demographics of professional participants were not systematically collected because FEAT facilitators did not anticipate professionals attending the family-oriented training. Although professional roles were never intentionally collected, several participants identified their role by writing it on the survey or disclosing their role during introductions and conversations throughout the training. Although these data were gathered by FEAT facilitators, the information cannot be quantified. Second, there is not a comparison sample of professionals who did not attend FEAT. Third, this sample lacks pure pre-intervention data since some of the professionals within this sample had already attended part or all of a previous FEAT prior to completing the pre-survey. This makes determining any impact of FEAT on the professionals who attended the training much more difficult. Finally, this is a small sample which also limits the reliability and generalizability of the results.

Implications

First, given professionals' interest and feedback, FEAT should be modified to be inclusive of professionals and intentionally marketed through professional organizations, as well

as school districts to reach middle and high school teachers and related service providers. Doing so would increase opportunities for IEP team members and community professionals to network and develop relationships (Gross et al., 2021). This would support efforts to ensure a seamless transition from school to work and encourage interagency collaboration, which is required by law and essential for student success and a smooth transition from school to adulthood (~~Griffths~~Griffiths et al., 2021; IDEA, 2004; WIOA, 2014) . In addition to incorporating the recommendations provided by participants, future FEAT sessions should expand discussions on how to address barriers (e.g., low expectations, dysfunctional community resources) identified by participants in the follow-up in order to better equip the participants to have the confidence and knowledge to address those barriers.

There are several implications for future FEAT research including the systematic collection of demographics on professionals, such as (a) professional role, (b) previous related roles, and (c) years in the profession. This would allow for comparisons of data across demographics. Also related to the issue of role, the Community Employment Survey currently asks respondents to identify if they are a family member, professional, or a young adult with a disability and requests that individuals who are both professionals and family members to complete the survey as family members, since that was the target audience for FEAT. Future research may adapt the Community Employment Survey to collect data on participants who hold multiple roles, such as professionals in the field and a family member and/or an individual with a disability. This would provide important information on those who attend FEAT, why they attended, and how their differing identities influence their expectations, knowledge, use of FEAT resources, and other information. In addition, future research should explore the influence of FEAT on professional practices, including collaboration with families and other professionals

and steps taken to support individuals with disabilities achieve competitive employment to more deeply understand the indirect influence of FEAT-informed professionals on family and student outcomes. For example, given research on ineffective transition plans (Snell-Rood et al., 2020), limited student involvement in transition planning (Johnson et al., 2020), meager collaboration between school and community professionals (Plotner et al., 2020), and limited student and family knowledge of employment resources - especially among families who do not speak English as their first language (Trainor et al., 2019), future research could target if and how FEAT informs professional behaviors during transition IEP meetings.

Although existing evidence shows that attendees reported higher expectations for employment and knowledge of employment services and resources, additional research is needed to determine the long-term influence of FEAT on attendee expectations and knowledge, and, ultimately, the employment of individuals with disabilities. Assessing FEAT's long-term impact on employment would provide essential evidence to determine the program's efficacy and affirm the value of states using authorized Pre-Employment Transition Services funding to educate families, including their members with disabilities, to increase employment. Finally, in-depth interviews with professional participants could provide a more focused, intentional examination of the perceptions and experiences of professionals, the actions they took after attending, and the outcomes of those actions. This would provide a deeper understanding of the influence of FEAT.

Conclusion

Importance of professional employment-related expectations and knowledge are critical factors in facilitating employment for young adults with disabilities. This exploratory research indicated that FEAT influenced professional expectations and knowledge, with professional attendees describing general satisfaction with the training. This research also indicated that there

exists opportunities to enhance FEAT, information that can be used to refine training programs to provide much-needed information to professionals working with young adults with disabilities seeking employment.

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Table 1

Major and Sub-topics of Family Employment Awareness Training (FEAT)

Major Topics	**Sub-topics**
PART ONE	
Employment options	Integrated, competitive employment
	Supported and customized employment
	Carved jobs
	Created jobs
	Resource ownership
	Self-employment
	Business within a business
	Employer-initiated models
Family role	Building a support network
	Contributing to the employment process
	Creating partnerships/Strategies for partnerships
Transition to	Work
	Postsecondary education/training
	Healthcare
Youth sessions	Job preferences
	Support needs
PART TWO	

Employee and employer supports	For employees (i.e., assistive technology, natural supports, job coaches, benefits specialist) For employers - local and national organizations designed support employers of persons with ISN
Services, benefits, and programs	Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Ticket to Work Career one-stop/Workforce centers Medicaid (i.e., waivers and buy-in programs) Community rehabilitation providers Transportation Work incentives (e.g., PASS, IRWE, 1619b)
Other funding and information	Small Business Administration (i.e., development centers, SCORE, women's business centers) ABLE Act Individual Development Accounts (IDAs)
Anti-discrimination laws	Federal (i.e., Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504) State Employment First policy
Youth sessions	Self-advocacy Disability disclosure

Table 2

Resources Professionals Accessed

Resources	Pre-survey		1 Year Post-survey	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Case manager	22	73.30%	18	60.00%
Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)	22	73.30%	21	70.00%
Job coaching services	20	66.70%	16	53.30%
Natural supports in the workplace such as help from coworkers	20	66.70%	16	53.30%
Community Developmental Disability Organization (CDDO)	17	56.70%	14	46.70%
A community rehabilitation/supported employment provider	14	46.70%	12	40.00%
Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) Waiver	14	46.70%	13	43.30%
Workforce Development Center	14	46.70%	15	50.00%
Assistive tech, including assessment of needs, device trial, or consultation	13	43.30%	10	33.30%
Transportation	13	43.30%	11	36.70%
Benefits specialist from Working Healthy, Social Security, or other org	12	40.00%	14	46.70%
Working Healthy	11	36.70%	9	30.00%

Center for Independent Living (CIL)	9	30.00%	7	23.30%
Project SEARCH	8	26.70%	11	36.70%
Community Mental Health Center (CMHC)	7	23.30%	5	16.70%
Work Opportunities Reward Kansans (WORK)	7	23.30%	5	16.70%
Disability services state maps	6	20.00%	6	20.00%
Ticket to Work	6	20.00%	7	23.30%
Cerebral Palsy Research Foundation (CPRF)	3	10.00%	4	13.30%
Impairment Related Work Expenses (IRWE)	3	10.00%	4	13.30%
Small Business Development Center (SBDC)	1	3.30%	2	6.70%
Plan for Achieving Self-Support (PASS)	1	3.30%	4	13.30%
Kansas Council on Developmental Disabilities	1	3.30%	5	16.70%
ADA technical assistance centers	0	0%	3	10.00%

Table 3

Perceived Barriers by Professionals

Perceived Barriers	Pre-survey		1 Year Post-Survey	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Poor social skills	15	50.00%	8	26.70%
Severity of disability or intensity of needs	10	33.30%	10	33.30%
Need for extensive or ongoing supports at work	9	30.00%	8	26.70%

Poor economy/job market	9	30.00%	6	20.00%
Lack of transportation	8	26.70%	11	36.70%
Lack of education, training, or work experience	7	23.30%	8	26.70%
Low motivation/self determination	7	23.30%	3	10.00%
Limited funding for employment services resulting in wait lists or no services	6	20.00%	6	20.00%
Low expectations for employment from society	5	16.70%	8	26.70%
Lack of employer flexibility such as the unwillingness to rearrange a work schedule or modify job tasks	5	16.70%	5	16.70%
Low expectations for employment from families	4	13.30%	9	30.00%
Lack of supported employment service providers and job coaches	4	13.30%	5	16.70%
Confusing employment resources or systems that are difficult to access or navigate	4	13.30%	3	10.00%
Loss of financial supports/ benefits while working	4	13.30%	3	10.00%
Inadequate/poor collaboration between schools, professionals, and families	3	10.00%	5	16.70%
Discrimination	3	10.00%	4	13.30%
Isolation/no social support	3	10.00%	3	10.00%

Low expectations for employment from teachers	3	10.00%	2	6.70%
Poor employer or coworker attitudes	2	6.70%	3	10.00%
Poor self confidence	2	6.70%	3	10.00%
Unsupportive coworkers	2	6.70%	2	6.70%
Inadequate funding for workplace accommodations/modifications	2	6.70%	1	3.30%
Lack of information or misinformation about employment resources	1	3.30%	6	20.00%
Negative past work experiences	1	3.30%	3	10.00%
Low expectations for employment from employment agencies	1	3.30%	1	3.30%
Ineffective or nonexistent accommodations	0	0%	2	6.70%

Figure 1 caption

Participant changes in general expectations for competitive employment of people with disabilities (“Expectation 1”), expectations for competitive employment of individuals with disabilities with varied levels of support needs (“Expectation 2”), knowledge about employment resources (“Knowledge”), and confident that knowledge mitigates barriers to attaining employment (“Confidence about knowledge”).

Figure 1

Professional's Response Changes on the Major Subscales