Unlocking Potential: Key Lessons from Kessler Foundation's Signature Employment Grants for People with Disabilities

A White Paper for Professionals in Grantmaking, Workforce Development, Disability Employment, and Human Resources

Q&A Regarding Key Findings

What are Kessler Foundation Signature Grants and who is eligible?

The Foundation awards grants to organizations that use innovation to enhance the employment and retention of individuals with disabilities. It funds pilot initiatives, demonstration projects, or social ventures aimed at addressing the high unemployment and underemployment rates among this demographic. The Signature Employment Grants program emphasizes innovation and intersectionality, encouraging interventions that consider multiple identities such as race, class, gender, disability, and poverty.

What was the goal of the white paper?

The goal of the white paper was to showcase the most notable program accomplishments, highlight promising or successful program components and workforce development strategies, and synthesize common challenges faced by the grantees that could offer important insights for future workforce development and employment programs aimed at connecting people with disabilities to the labor market and jobs.

Who provided the white paper analysis?

Kessler Foundation contracted with the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University to prepare an executive-level white paper based on highlights, promising practices, and challenges of Kessler Foundation's Signature Employment Grant program evaluations for recipients awarded in or after 2015 and whose programs were concluded by 2022.

What key attributes did programs use to reach their stated goals?

Programs varied their approaches to meet their stated goals; however, many key aspects of their efforts were the same. Most programs were classified into two categories based on the models they implemented: those offering structured services such as curricula, training, technology, or education to enhance job search skills, social skills, or networking capabilities for job seekers with disabilities; and those providing continuous, often individualized support, such as embedded case management, navigators, or coaches.

What commonalities were found across successful program elements?

Clearly defined roles and program goals
- Collaborative working environments and high staff morale
- Effective communication among program staff, stakeholders, and participants
- Strategic coordination through planning and implementation of program activities
- Using technology to expand reach and impact

What features did the most successful programs share?

- Person-centric approach and individualized support to help job seekers find and achieve employment
- Offering services and resources that were relevant and helpful to job seekers with disabilities
- Ability of program staff to pivot to new approaches and collaborations as needed

What organizational barriers hindered successful program implementation?

- Project delays
- Staff turnover and limited staff availability
- Low organizational capacity
- Lack of communication between partners
- Overambitious goals

How did program staff members address and resolve challenges?

- Diversifying the roster of employers for hiring opportunities
- Modifying the program model mid-stream or refocusing efforts
- Hiring additional staff or repurposing existing staff
- Altering organizational practices in response to challenges

Which challenges remained difficult to overcome?

- COVID-19
- Participants needing additional, extensive support
- Short implementation timeframes
- Organizational capacity issues
- Constrained resources

Read the complete white paper [link to come]
Read summary of key findings [link to come]