

Family Employment Awareness Training (FEAT): A Research-Based Program for Promoting High Expectations for Employment and Knowledge of Resources

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Abstract

The Family Employment Awareness Training (FEAT) is a two-part training for youth with disabilities, their families, and the professionals who support them. FEAT's goal is to raise attendees' expectations about competitive integrated employment opportunities for people with disabilities and to increase their knowledge of how to access local, state, and federal resources to facilitate employment. FEAT was designed to help transition-age youth (ages 14–22) with significant support needs—including youth who currently receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or may apply for SSI benefits in the future—bridge the gap between secondary school and adulthood. Youth with disabilities must address multiple issues to understand that working competitively is achievable and expected. FEAT simplifies transitional issues related to finding jobs and accessing services and supports and provides transition-age youth with guidance to facilitate a successful school-to-employment transition. FEAT attendees learn about (1) outside-the-box ways to think about employment, (2) others' experiences with employment, (3) local resources, and (4) ways to maximize their resources through effective use of SSI and other program provisions and asset development opportunities. During the training, attendees develop a plan for employment, including next steps focused on using what they have learned about the resources. After the training, participants have access to technical assistance to support them in overcoming barriers they might encounter on the path to meaningful employment. Data indicate that FEAT increases expectations for competitive integrated employment and improves knowledge of resources to support employment. To date, FEAT has successfully been implemented in five states.

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I. Introduction

For many individuals with disabilities, competitive employment is evasive for multiple reasons, including (1) low expectations (Mann, Moni, and Cuskelly 2016), (2) limited resources and lack of access to employment service providers (National Disability Rights Network 2011), (3) discrimination (Francis, Reed, and Howard 2020), and (4) ineffective transition plans in high school (Francis and others 2014b; Timmons and others, 2011). In fact, the employment rate for working-age individuals without disabilities is about twice that of their peers with disabilities—79 percent compared with 37 percent (Erickson, Lee, and von Schrader 2019). This gap exists despite federal laws intended to bolster employment among individuals with disabilities (for example, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014) and has made people with disabilities more than twice as likely as individuals without disabilities to live in poverty and reliant on benefits from Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income (SSI), which inherently discourage work (National Council on Disability 2017). During the transition from high school to adulthood, many families begin looking toward benefits like SSI to ensure that their young adults' needs will be met. Without knowledge of customized employment possibilities or correct information about how SSI recipients can both receive benefits and work, many youth will apply for SSI without pursuing employment in earnest.

In 2010, researchers at the University of Kansas, in partnership with Families Together, Inc. (the Kansas parent training and information center [PTI]), sought to address the issues that discourage youth with disabilities and their families from preparing for and seeking employment. Together they designed and tested the Family Employment Awareness Training (FEAT), focused on youth ages 14 to 22, both currently in school and out of school, with significant support needs who receive or will likely apply for SSI (hereafter referred to as “youth”) and their families. FEAT encourages participants to maximize SSI benefits, Social Security work incentives, and asset development programs in support of their goal of gaining employment and financial self-sufficiency, so that they are not dependent on Social Security benefits. Ultimately, FEAT aims to enhance the quality of life among adults with disabilities by increasing the likelihood that they will engage in competitive integrated employment. To that end, FEAT targets two essential components found to influence competitive employment: (1) raising expectations for competitive integrated employment and (2) increasing knowledge of resources, services, and supports for gaining satisfying employment in local communities.

II. Family Employment Awareness Training

FEAT is a two-part, knowledge-based intervention that is provided free of charge to participants through state-level funding streams (such as developmental disability councils, vocational rehabilitation services, departments of education, workforce development agencies, and foundation grants) and designed to help youth, their families, and support providers develop high expectations for the youth's employment and gain knowledge about resources to support competitive employment. FEAT originated in Kansas in 2010 but has since been implemented in four other states (Rhode Island, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and Indiana). The training generally occurs over two 7-

hour days. Although the core components are consistent across states (see Table 1), the content is tailored to each state to increase its relevance to attendees, with examples of employment and available resources and services “in their own backyard.” For example, FEAT shares stories of successful competitive employment from various communities within each state where the training is offered as well as examples from across the nation to support transition to employment and use of local, state, and federal employment resources. This design makes FEAT impactful and relevant to the attendees at a local level and flexible enough for multistate expansion. FEAT is particularly relevant to youth who currently receive or may receive SSI because it encourages competitive integrated employment, addresses myths and concerns regarding benefits and working, shows how to use work incentives to support work, and educates about available asset development options—all of which increase youth’s likelihood of working and reducing dependence on benefits.

The FEAT curriculum addresses a multitude of topics, including customized employment options; family role in supporting employment; transitions to work, postsecondary education/training, and adult health care; support resources for employees and employers; antidiscrimination laws; self-advocacy; asset development; and funding, services, disability benefits, and programs available at the local, state, and federal levels. Table 1 provides an outline of the FEAT curriculum; these topics and training activities are considered to be the core components of FEAT that are adapted to reflect the state’s policies, resources, and programs and stories of employment from the state’s urban, suburban, and rural communities. Training topics and subtopics covered across Parts 1 and 2 are dedicated to raising expectations and knowledge regarding competitive employment for individuals with significant disabilities. FEAT activities include lectures; small group activities; networking sessions with representatives from local organizations; presentations from local community employees, employers, and entrepreneurs; and young adult breakout sessions focusing on brainstorming job possibilities, identifying support needs, self-advocacy, and disability disclosure (Gross, Francis, and Pijem 2015). Finally, FEAT works with attendees to develop an individualized plan for employment with five action steps that build on the information and resources acquired through the training. Figure 1 displays the FEAT plan for employment.

In addition to these curriculum topics and training activities, FEAT offers all attendees opportunities to participate in both individual and group follow-up technical assistance activities (another core component of FEAT) to support them in applying the information learned through FEAT. Individual technical assistance is conducted via phone or email within one to two months of the training with attendees who requested it on their plan for employment. Then, both three months and nine months after the training, attendees are invited to a group technical assistance activity held at their local CareerOneStop/Workforce/American Job Center and delivered in collaboration with the center’s staff. This activity provides attendees with opportunities to receive technical assistance on achieving the action steps in their plans for employment and introduces them to employment resources that they might not have accessed otherwise.

Table 1. FEAT curriculum topics, subtopics, and training activities

Topics	Subtopics	Training activities
Supported and customized competitive employment options	Carved jobs Created jobs Resource ownership Self-employment Business within a business Employer-initiated models	Interactive lecture (PowerPoint, videos, success stories) Community speakers (employees, employers, and entrepreneurs) Small group activity (job preferences) Youth session (job preferences and support needs) Resource USB drive
Family role in supporting employment	Building a support network Contributing to the employment process Creating family-professional partnerships	Interactive lecture Opportunities for networking Creating an action plan for employment Resource USB drive
Transition to adulthood	Work Postsecondary education/training Health care	Interactive lecture Youth session Resource USB drive
Support resources	Employee resources: assistive technology, natural supports, job coaches, benefits specialists Employer resources: local and national organizations providing services and supports to employers of persons with disabilities	Interactive lecture Community speakers (organization and agency representatives) Resource USB drive
Employment funding, services, benefits, and programs	Vocational rehabilitation Ticket to Work CareerOneStop/Workforce/American Job Centers State Medicaid (waivers and buy-in programs) Community rehabilitation providers Transportation Social Security Administration work incentives (for example, PASS, IRWE, 1619b)	Interactive lecture Community speakers (organization and agency representatives) Opportunities for networking Small group activity (support needs and resources) Resource USB drive
Other funding and information	Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) accounts Individual development accounts (IDAs) Small Business Administration (development centers, Service Corps of Retired Executives, women's business centers) State disability services resource lists	Interactive lecture Community speakers (organization and agency representatives) Resource USB drive
Antidiscrimination policy	Federal law (Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504) State laws Employment First policy	Interactive lecture Youth sessions (disability disclosure and self-advocacy) Resource USB drive

Source: Adapted from Francis and others (2013).

IRWE = income-related work expenses; PASS = Plan to Achieve Self-Support.

FEAT is delivered through a train-the-trainer model that consists of a university–parent advocacy organization partnership. The FEAT consulting team operates out of Indiana University and is led by Dr. Judith Gross. In each state in which FEAT is delivered, a parent advocacy organization leads the team. In Kansas, Nebraska, and Indiana, that organization is the state PTI, but this can be customized in each state. For example, the leadership role is held by a state developmental disability council in Oklahoma and a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) in Rhode Island (the Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities at Rhode Island College), both of which partner with their state PTI in the delivery of FEAT.

Figure 1. FEAT plan for employment



My next steps to employment are:	The resources I will use to accomplish my next steps are:
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

I will complete this plan by: _____ (Date)

Would you like to have follow-up support from your friends at Families Together, Inc?

Yes No

If yes, please write your name and phone or email contact below:

Name: _____

Contact (phone/email): _____

Please note specific areas in which you would like support:

III. Why FEAT?

Employment is critical to a high quality of life (Merchant and others 2014). However, individuals with disabilities who have significant support needs are less likely to engage in competitive employment than their peers without disabilities or with fewer support needs (Siperstein, Parker, and Drascher 2013). FEAT seeks to provide stories of employment success from the state in which it is implemented to raise expectations for employment for people with disabilities.

Although FEAT was designed for the families of transition-age youth with disabilities who would require support to attain or maintain competitive employment, approximately 30 percent of attendees are professionals who support such youth, including special educators, employment specialists, and case managers. These professionals have reported that FEAT helped them learn more about other organizations and about how to better support the youth and families with whom they work (Gross and Francis 2017). Therefore, FEAT encourages professional attendance at trainings, particularly because professionals often disseminate misinformation regarding the availability of and criteria for accessing employment resources to youth and their families (U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO] 2012). FEAT increases knowledge of local, state, and federal resources to support employment and encourages professional partnerships and interagency collaboration through involvement in the training delivery. Finally, FEAT involves goal setting—and, more specifically, identifying implementation intentions regarding when, where, and how a goal will be achieved, which is linked to increased goal attainment (Gollwitzer and Sheeran 2006). The sections below describe the roles that partnerships, expectations, knowledge, and goals play in FEAT and in ensuring a successful transition to employment.

A. Partnerships are imperative

One of the challenges that youth and their families face in the transition process is the movement from a single school system that includes all supports and services to the adult services landscape in which resources are spread across several different (and often disconnected) systems (Francis and others 2018). Often, each resource has different eligibility criteria for accessing it, which can be confusing and overwhelming and can lead to misunderstandings among providers, who may spread misinformation to youth and their families (GAO 2012). Better coordination among these different systems and resources would support a more effective transition for youth, especially because youth transitioning to adulthood benefit from both informal and formal supports during this time (Morningstar and Mazzotti 2014). Often, this process can take years, with family and other sources of support assisting youth to gradually make a successful transition (Test 2012). Further, families frequently play a major role in establishing expectations for desired youth outcomes (Boehm, Carter, and Taylor 2015). As a result, family-professional partnership is essential for the transition from high school to adult life (including competitive employment) to be successful (Francis and others 2018).

Addressing multiple facets of an individual's life in a clear and actionable way is central to the design and delivery of FEAT. FEAT addresses the need for youth and their support teams to think through essential factors such as work preferences, transportation, benefits, health care, asset development, and more to create and meet employment goals. FEAT brings together key state-level partners including workforce development centers, state developmental disability councils, and vocational

rehabilitation agencies through a collaborative and coordinated train-the-trainer model, led by state parent advocacy organizations (often the state PTT) with guidance from the FEAT consulting team. These intentional coordination efforts increase familiarity and collaboration among key partners and increase the likelihood that families and youth will access available employment resources (Francis and others 2015).

Families of transition-age youth are essential partners in the transition from secondary school to adulthood and employment (as per the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 [IDEIA]; Francis and others 2018). This is true for all transitioning youth, but it is particularly true for youth with disabilities, who may continue to rely on their families for natural support throughout adulthood (Francis, Reed, and Howard 2020; Jivanjee, Kruzich, and Gordon 2009). In many service programs, families are often not considered a key partner after youth reach the age of majority in their state (Jivanjee, Kruzich, and Gordon 2009), which can result in miscommunication, misinformation, and missed opportunities. Families, educators, and community service providers are the most influential figures with regard to a youth's development of expectations about work as an adult because they are the primary supports and sources of guidance for that youth in the transition to adulthood (Gross and Francis 2015). FEAT creates an opportunity for youth, their families, and other sources of support such as teachers and case managers to receive the vital transition puzzle pieces together at same time.

B. Expectations are essential

Although research on the causal impact of expectations on young adult outcomes is difficult to conduct because of other influencing factors (including discrimination, severity of disability, access to support services, and family unemployment), several studies suggest it plays a strong role in achieving positive postsecondary outcomes. Research suggests that parental expectations can influence employment outcomes (Doren, Gau, and Lindstrom 2012; Mann, Moni, and Cuskelly 2016; Papay and Bambara 2014; Timmons and others 2011). Carter and colleagues (2011) found that when parents strongly believed that their child with a severe disability would get a paying job, their child was five times more likely to be employed after high school than other youth with severe disabilities. Similarly, Doren and colleagues (2012) found that parental expectations were significantly associated with positive school and post-school outcomes (including graduation, earning a standard diploma, competitive employment, and postsecondary education), regardless of family sociodemographic characteristics. Nonetheless, many families expect their youth with disabilities to work in a segregated setting (Antosh and others 2013; Hasnain and Balcazar 2009). This expectation is largely based on families' perception that competitive employment is an ideal but not a realistic outcome (Martinez, Conroy, and Cerreto 2012), and it contributes to underrepresentation of individuals with significant support needs in the competitive workplace. Further, low expectations and lack of a vision for employment significantly impede successful employment outcomes (Bambara, Wilson, and McKenzie 2007; Hendricks and Wehman 2009). These findings underscore the importance of targeting families' expectations in employment trainings such as FEAT.

Along with providing information on the necessary transitional pieces, FEAT presents a clear and compelling picture of individuals with disabilities in the attendees' community who have achieved competitive integrated employment. As a result, youth and their families can raise their expectations for competitive employment and begin planning how to organize available resources to support their vision of a successful future. Part 1 of the FEAT training, "Building the Dream of Employment," was designed to raise expectations of employment through understanding different types of employment (for example, customized and supported employment), considering various issues arising during the transition from school to work, identifying supports to help with this transitional life stage, and hearing local success stories from individuals with disabilities in competitive integrated employment. Specifically, FEAT introduces and describes numerous examples of (1) carved, (2) created, (3) resource-ownership, (4) business-within-a-business, (5) self-employment, and (6) employer-initiated models of employment.¹

Throughout FEAT, attendees engage in activities designed to guide them through focused planning regarding employment needs and supports. Figure 2 illustrates a FEAT activity designed to help families consider possible employment options for their youth with a disability. Families complete the activity while youth adjourn to another room to consider similar questions and note their own ideas for potential employment goals with support from FEAT trainers. Activities such as these prepare youth and their support circles to start investigating resources to make dreams for employment a reality. Separately gathering this information on expectations from youth and their families can be very informative about who in a family might need to raise their expectations or may not be aware of the youth's interests and preferences regarding employment.

¹ In carved, created, and resource-ownership models of employment, job strategies are negotiated on an individual level with an employer to create a position that uses the person's skills and strengths to meet that employer's needs. The business-within-a-business model is a type of self-employment that uses an existing business's space and/or customer base. Employer-initiated models use universally accessible hiring strategies and work environments implemented by corporations for the purpose of increasing diversity of staffing by facilitating the employment of people with disabilities.


Figure 2. FEAT “Discovering Passion” activity for families


Family
 Employment
 Awareness
 Training


Discovering Passion

What kind of environment does _____ enjoy being in?


- Sound – noisy or quiet?
- People – many or few?
- Location – indoors or outdoors







What kind of activities does _____ prefer?
 What activities does he/she enjoy doing for extended time periods?



Considering environment and activity preferences, what are some possible employment ideas for _____ ?

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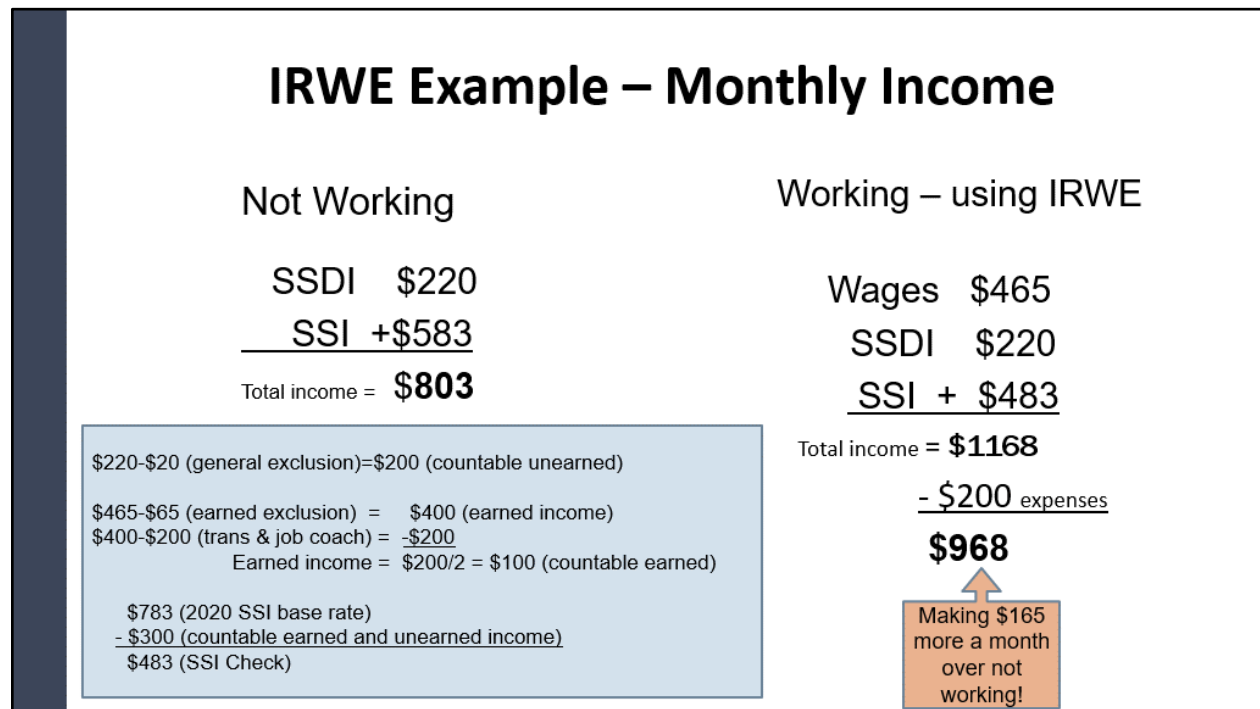
C. Knowledge is power

A lack of knowledge about the resources that are available to support competitive employment can lead some families to settle for sheltered work, or no work, for their youth (Larson and others 2011; Martinez, Conroy, and Cerreto 2012). Familial knowledge of employment resources can influence employment outcomes for individuals with significant support needs (Hirano and Rowe 2015). Yet more than 70 percent of families of transition-age students report needing information on transition planning, and 90 percent report needing information on adult services such as those that can support acquiring housing or gaining employment after high school (Antosh and others 2013). A lack of information about the adult service system leads some families to rely on professionals for advice and guidance and thus makes them vulnerable to misinformation (Timmons and others 2011; Yarbrough, Getze, and Kester 2014). For example, families often fear that their youth with disabilities will lose important state and federal benefits if they work because of program rules regarding income and asset limits (Butterworth and others 2009; National Council on Disability

2009). However, this is not usually the case because there are several ways in which individuals with disabilities can maintain needed benefits, such as health insurance and income support, while working. For example, Social Security work incentive provisions, Medicaid buy-in programs, and asset development accounts such as Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) accounts and individual development accounts (IDAs) can allow individuals to maintain eligibility for benefits while working.

Part 2 of FEAT, “Identifying and Accessing Employment Resources,” focuses on resources, supports, and funding that can build a bridge to employment for youth. Accessing supplemental cash and health insurance benefits, such as SSI and Medicaid, is frequently considered a safe way of ensuring a youth’s needs are met into adulthood, even if the benefits are not enough to meet basic needs. FEAT shows participants that benefits and work incentives are important tools for achieving employment. When taught about work incentives and informed about employment-related resources and requirements, such as Social Security Administration (SSA) rules regarding work and income, families are more likely to encourage their youth to work (Rosenbaum and others 2017). FEAT demonstrates how work incentives are calculated so that youth and their families can better understand how work impacts benefits and see that working truly equals a better monetary outcome. At this critical stage in life, it is exceedingly important for youth to increase their knowledge before they expect to rely on benefits instead of becoming employed. Through learning about SSA work incentives such as the Student Earned Income Exclusion and the Plan to Achieve Self-Support, youth are encouraged to live beyond SSI limits and to strive for the quality of life they desire. Figure 3 displays a FEAT slide showing how impairment-related work expenses (IRWE) are applied; such a breakdown can help attendees better understand the relationship between work and benefits and how they might be better off working than relying on benefits alone.

Figure 3. FEAT curriculum PowerPoint slide demonstrating IRWE calculations



IRWE = impairment-related work expenses; SSI = Supplemental Security Income.

D. Goals facilitate action

Research on goal-setting theory has found that goals influence behavior, as well as motivation, effort, problem-solving, confidence, and performance (Locke and others 1990). Over a decade of such research has found that when individuals set specific and challenging, but achievable, goals, they are more likely to demonstrate high performance related to those goals. Moreover, research suggests that writing down goals results in significantly more goal achievement than simply formulating goals or stating them verbally (Matthews 2015). Goals help to direct action toward a desired outcome. To ensure that youth with disabilities are provided with adequate support and information in planning for the transition to adulthood, individualized education programs (IEPs) include postsecondary goals (per IDEIA). All youth with a disability in transition from secondary school to adulthood must have a postsecondary IEP goal focused on employment. However, that goal can be elusive without adequate knowledge of available resources to support employment.

A primary tenet of FEAT is translating expectations and knowledge into action steps. The last activity participants complete is the plan for employment, which challenges them to put their knowledge to work by identifying five next steps they can take to get themselves, or the youth for whom they are attending FEAT, closer to achieving their employment goal. Participants are challenged to align each step with a resource that they learned about during FEAT to support their application of this new knowledge. The plan includes a self-imposed timeline for completing the five steps, along with a place to share contact information and request follow-up technical assistance from the trainers. The plans are printed on duplicate, tear-off sheets, which allows FEAT

participants to take one copy and leave another with the trainers for use in providing follow-up technical assistance.

FEAT partners (including state PTIs, workforce development centers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and case managers) collaborate to provide participants with technical assistance after training. Individual technical assistance is available by request within one to two months of attending FEAT. Participants may request it through the plan for employment, or they may directly reach out to FEAT trainers via phone or email at any time following FEAT attendance. Group technical assistance is offered at three months and again at nine months after training. Group technical assistance is intended to be done in partnership with state workforce development centers. The meetings are held at the center nearest to where the training was conducted, thus introducing FEAT participants to a new employment resource that they may not have accessed otherwise because it is not specific to disability. This arrangement also supports workforce development center staff in engaging with and better understanding how to support individuals with disabilities who are seeking services.

Follow-up services are an essential part of FEAT to ensure the continuation of steps in an individual's plan for employment. FEAT technical assistance typically involves (1) a phone, email, or face-to-face check-in to see how FEAT participants are doing with regard to their plan for employment; (2) a review of their plan to determine if they need additional information, support, or advice to complete all of the action steps; (3) provision of additional information and resources; and (4) guidance in accessing needed services and identifying next steps once those in the plan are completed. In addition, FEAT trainers encourage attendees to make in-person appointments with state partners and provide them with direct contact information for needed resources. The trainers also encourage participants to use their plan for employment as a foundation to follow up with the state partners they learned about through FEAT who provide employment-related support.

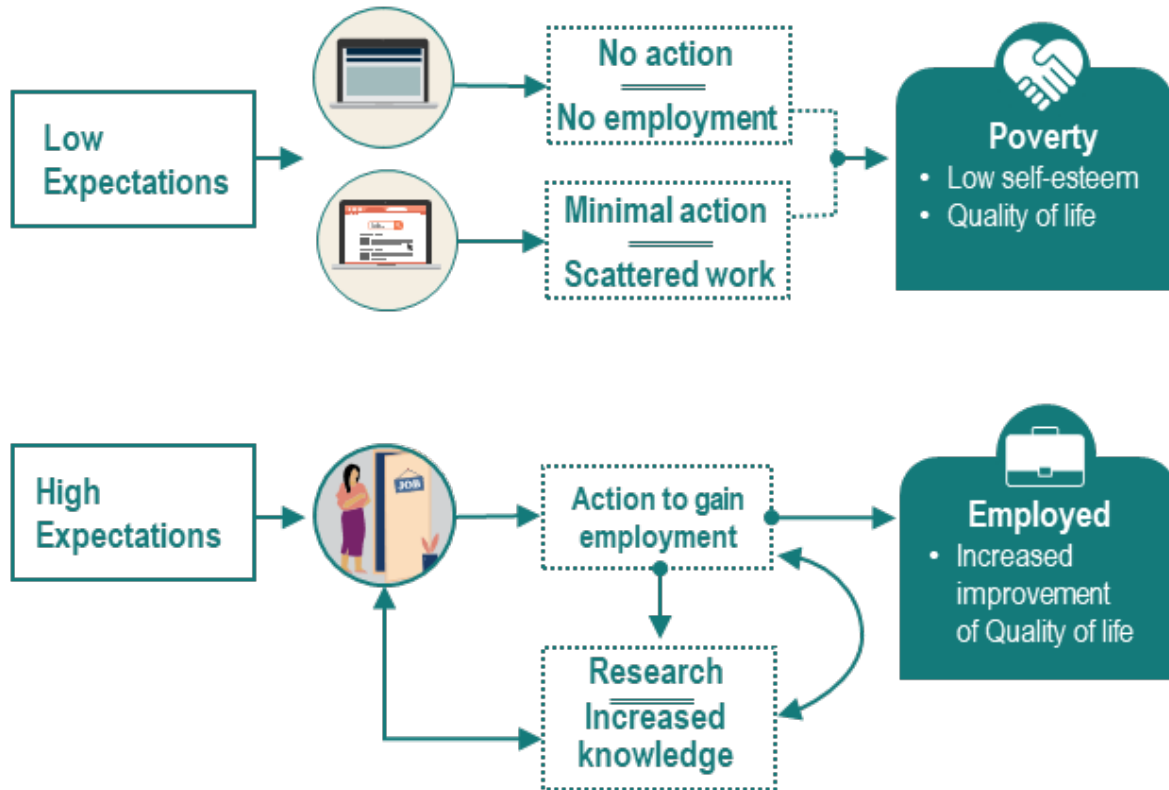
IV. FEAT's Theory of Change

FEAT's long-term goal is to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities through engagement in competitive integrated employment. One of the primary ways in which FEAT addresses that goal is through increasing expectations for employment among youth and their families. However, for these individuals to make competitive integrated employment a reality, simply visualizing themselves in these positions is not enough. For that reason, FEAT also provides attendees with information on resources and supports that can assist in achieving the overall goal of attaining competitive employment. Through information on how to achieve transition goals and what local supports and resources can be accessed to support the goal of employment, youth and their families can build a path toward the youth's preferred employment outcome.

Figure 4 demonstrates the connections between expectations, knowledge, and action in achieving employment. Expectations precede action. Without high expectations, people do not act, or they take only passive action (for example, thinking about employment). Further, knowledge influences the actions people take. For youth with disabilities, the expectation that competitive integrated employment is possible and knowledge about resources that support employment are necessary

preconditions for successful and sustainable competitive integrated employment. FEAT was designed specifically to increase those expectations and that knowledge among youth with disabilities, including those with significant support needs, and their families.

Figure 4. Importance of expectations in employment outcomes



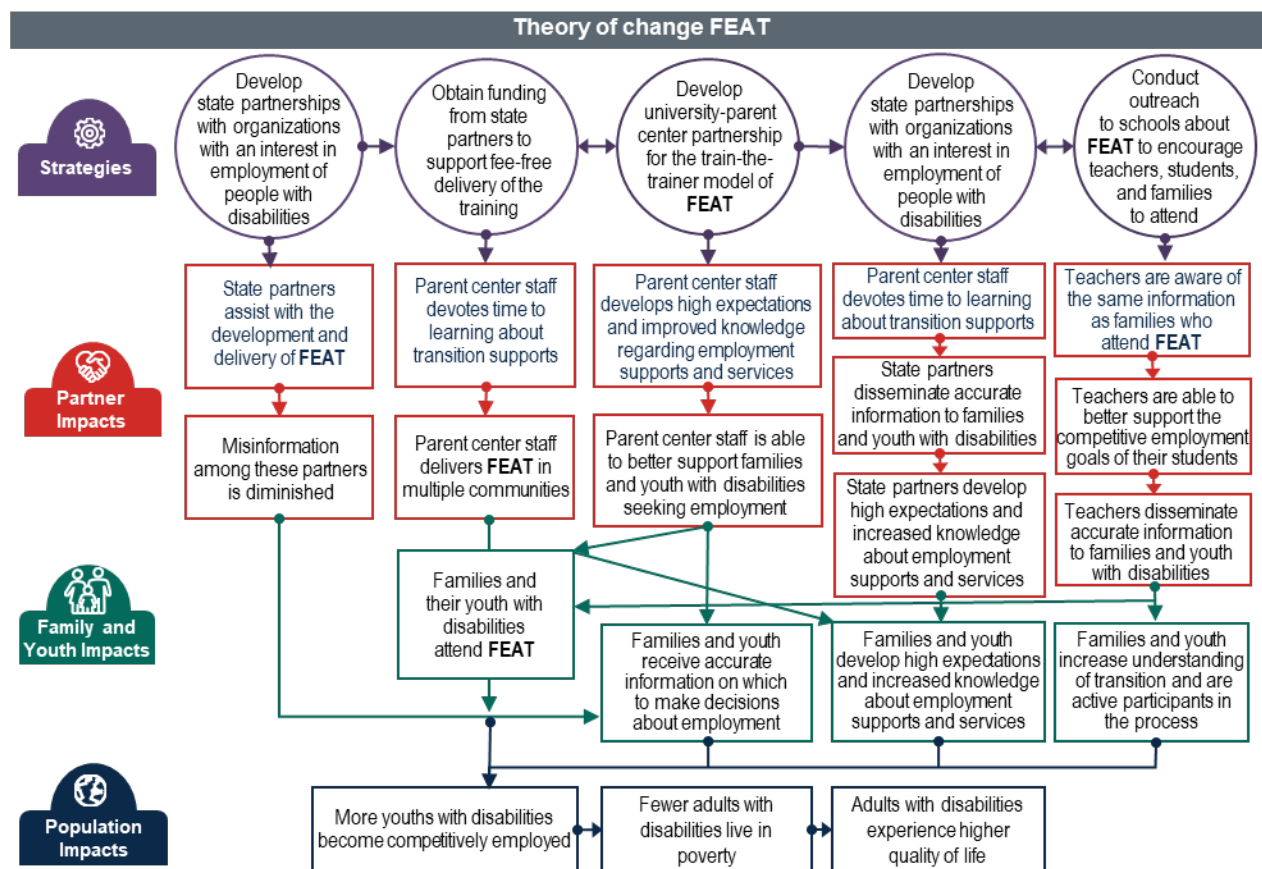
Designed using the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s model (Organizational Research Services 2004) for developing a theory of change, the FEAT theory of change shown in Figure 5 demonstrates how the program integrates strategies, information, and activities to promote positive outcomes among state partners, families, and youth, including (1) enhanced expectations regarding competitive employment for people with disabilities; (2) increased knowledge of employment options, services, and supports; (3) increased use of available services and supports.

Implementing FEAT requires creating and delivering a state-adapted curriculum through strategies that entail the development of a strong implementation team led by a family disability advocacy organization, along with partnerships with other education, advocacy, and service organizations interested in promoting the employment of people with disabilities. Through these partnerships, it is possible to identify various potential funding sources to support FEAT’s fee-free delivery, thus ensuring that families who need the information have access to it without financial burden. As evidenced in the FEAT theory of change, these partnerships are essential to success in implementing FEAT. The five strategies listed in the theory of change are (1) developing state partnerships with organizations with an interest in the employment of people with disabilities; (2) working with state partners to obtain funding to support fee-free delivery of FEAT; (3) developing the university–

parent advocacy organization partnership to support the train-the-trainer model and adapt the FEAT curriculum to the state; (4) delivering FEAT training and technical assistance across the state in urban, suburban, and rural communities; and (5) conducting outreach via schools and other service and support organizations to encourage professionals, students, and families to attend.

These key strategies lead to positive impacts for the state partners implementing FEAT and the youth, families, and other professionals who participate in FEAT (see Figure 5). For example, the development of state partnerships with organizations interested in employing people with disabilities and the development of university–parent advocacy organization partnerships to support the adaptation and implementation of FEAT reduces the misinformation and increases the accuracy of the information provided by these entities, which ultimately supports youth and their families in making fact-based decisions about employment. These positive impacts then lead to the ultimate long-term impacts of increased competitive employment and, as a result, improved quality of life among individuals with disabilities.

Figure 5. FEAT’s theory of change



V. Implementing FEAT

FEAT was designed as a train-the-trainer model, with state-level family disability advocacy organizations, such as state PTIs, acting as trainers that are in turn trained by the FEAT consulting

team, led by Dr. Gross at Indiana University (formerly at the University of Kansas, where FEAT was developed). However, members of state FEAT training teams may vary, with a different organization, such as the state council on developmental disabilities or UCEDD, taking the lead as the state trainer. Because the FEAT curriculum is contextualized to each state, including its culture, resources, and population, FEAT takes time to adapt, learn, and implement with independence. Because of the level of effort and support required to contextualize FEAT, states seeking to implement the training must first identify potential state partners with an interest in the competitive employment outcomes of youth and seek potential sources of funding to support the start-up of FEAT. State FEAT partners could include any or all of the organizations listed in Table 2. Table 2 also suggests possible responsibilities of and benefits to each partner. Each state must identify a core group of partners to constitute its state FEAT team and determine responsibilities for the program’s development and implementation. Replication of FEAT requires a minimal annual licensing fee along with a three-year contract, with fading support, under which the FEAT consulting team provides the train-the-trainer component to the state FEAT training team.

Table 2. Potential state team partners in the implementation of FEAT

State FEAT partners	Responsibilities	Benefits
Parent training and information (PTI) center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertise FEAT • Lead agency in collaboration with university faculty to adapt FEAT to be state specific • Host and participate in the FEAT train-the-trainer event • Host and deliver FEAT training events across the state • Provide individual and group technical assistance to FEAT participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State-specific evidence-based employment transition training curriculum designed for families • Free professional development for parent specialists • Increased collaboration with other agencies/organizations • Increased transition training capacity • Opportunities to network and collaborate with various state agencies • State revenue directed to support PTI staff in FEAT adaptation and implementation
Workforce development centers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertise FEAT • Present about agency during Part 2 of FEAT • Host group technical assistance for FEAT participants at the local center three months and nine months after FEAT attendance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free professional development for staff • Opportunity to conduct outreach within the community • Increased collaboration with other agencies/organizations • Increased staff capacity to provide services with disabilities • Opportunities to network and collaborate with various state agencies • Aligns with WIOA-required pre-employment transition services, including providing services to vulnerable populations

State FEAT partners	Responsibilities	Benefits
State vocational rehabilitation agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertise FEAT • Present about agency during Part 2 of FEAT • Provide financial support (for example, pre-employment transition services) to the lead agency adapting and implementing FEAT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free professional development for providers • Opportunity to conduct outreach within the community • Increased collaboration with other agencies/organizations • Increased staff capacity • Opportunities to network and collaborate with various state agencies • Aligns with WIOA-required pre-employment transition services, including providing services to vulnerable populations
State disability services and/or state Medicaid agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertise FEAT • Present about agency during Part 2 of FEAT • Provide financial support to the lead agency adapting and implementing FEAT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free professional development for providers • Opportunity to conduct outreach within the community • Increased collaboration with other agencies/organizations • Opportunities to network and collaborate with various state agencies • Increased staff capacity
Developmental disability council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertise FEAT • Provide financial support to the lead agency adapting and implementing FEAT • Support adapting FEAT to be state specific by providing information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free professional development • Opportunity to conduct outreach within the community • Opportunities to network and collaborate with various state agencies • Aligns with Developmental Disability State Plan goals • Increased collaboration with other agencies/organizations
Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE) chapter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertise FEAT • Support adapting FEAT to be state specific by providing information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aligns with state APSE chapter's goals • Opportunities to network and collaborate with various state agencies
State developmental disability councils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertise FEAT • Support adapting FEAT to be state specific by providing information • Provide financial support to the lead agency adapting and implementing FEAT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often aligns with state plan goals • Opportunities to network and collaborate with various state agencies
Community rehabilitation providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertise FEAT • Support adapting FEAT to be state specific by providing information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free professional development • Opportunity to conduct outreach within the community • Opportunities to network and collaborate with various state agencies • Increased staff capacity

State FEAT partners	Responsibilities	Benefits
School district special education staff (such as transition coordinators and administrators)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertise FEAT to youth in transition and their families • Support attendance by special educators of transition-age youth for their professional development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free professional development • Opportunity to conduct outreach within the community • Opportunities to network and collaborate with various state agencies • Increased staff capacity (writing quality transition plans, parent participation in the transition process) • More knowledgeable and involved families in transition process
State department of education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertise FEAT • Provide financial support to the lead agency adapting and implementing FEAT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State-specific evidence-based employment transition training opportunity for teachers • Opportunity to conduct outreach to families within the community • Opportunities to network and collaborate with various state agencies
Other potential strong partners (such as UCEDD, The Arc, centers for independent living, state vocational rehabilitation services, and workforce development agencies)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertise FEAT • Provide financial support to the lead agency adapting and implementing FEAT • Support adapting FEAT to be state specific by providing information • Present about agency during Part 2 of FEAT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free professional development • Opportunity to conduct outreach within the community • Opportunities to network and collaborate with various state agencies • Increased staff capacity

FEAT = Family Employment Awareness Training; UCEDD = University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities; WIOA = Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

Once the state FEAT team has been identified, it develops a contract with the University of Kansas for access to the FEAT license and curriculum (\$3,000 for the first year and \$1,000 for each year of implementation) and a three-year contract with Dr. Gross (one of this paper’s authors) at Indiana University for the training and technical assistance with implementation. Under the licensing agreement, state FEAT teams receive templates for all FEAT training and research materials in a shared cloud storage location where state FEAT teams can access the materials and share their adaptations, including English and Spanish versions of:

- FEAT training manual
- PowerPoint training slideshows
- Associated supplemental materials such as training activities, a glossary, and evaluation forms
- “Steps to Employment” summary brief
- Annotated employment web resources document
- Outcome research surveys
- Train-the-trainer webinar training materials and subsequent recordings

Dr. Gross or another FEAT consulting team member provides training and technical assistance to the state FEAT team as it adapts the materials to be state specific and learns the content and training format of FEAT. This is completed through a series of eight train-the-trainer webinars, monthly technical assistance state FEAT team meetings, and a co-presented train-the-trainer event that is held once the curriculum is completely adapted. The FEAT trainer reviews the state-adapted training materials and provides support and constructive feedback on the curriculum and its delivery, ensuring it retains the core components of FEAT and is providing current and accurate information about employment resources. The state FEAT team and FEAT consulting team trainer work together to identify needed corrections to the curriculum or changes to its delivery before scheduling and conducting the first FEAT event targeting families and their youth with disabilities.

The FEAT consulting team trainer provides support to the FEAT team in conducting outreach across stakeholders in their state to support recruitment. FEAT team members typically recruit participants through two primary avenues—state high schools and PTI centers—by providing them with FEAT distribution emails and fliers (written in English and Spanish, as are all other FEAT materials) for the families of students with disabilities 14 years and older. The extent to which there is more focused and individualized outreach in communities across the state, such as presentations about FEAT delivered to school special education staff, depends on the level of funding for FEAT's implementation.

The FEAT consulting team trainer works with the state FEAT team to plan their first FEAT event, such as by reaching out to schools to recruit participants, ensuring an appropriate and accessible training space, soliciting speakers for both Part 1 and Part 2, and preparing related supplemental materials and handouts. If the state FEAT team chooses to conduct outcome research—most teams have conducted some sort of short-term outcomes assessment with attendees—the FEAT trainer assists in the development, planning, and interpretation of data. In addition, the FEAT trainer provides support and guidance on the conduct of both the individual and group technical assistance activities, including format, location, activities, recruitment/advertising to FEAT attendees, and provision of additional supports. Finally, when the state team is independently conducting FEAT, the FEAT trainer assesses the fidelity of that implementation, while also supporting the FEAT team in self-assessing fidelity, and advises on the importance of the various components, should fidelity be lacking.

The FEAT trainer provides ongoing technical assistance for a period of three years, supporting implementation, assessment of fidelity, review and analysis of collected data, efforts to seek additional funding, annual license maintenance, annual curriculum update reviews and feedback, and quarterly multistate technical assistance calls in which trainers can collaborate across FEAT implementation states to address key topics of concern in implementation (such as switching to an online format because of COVID-19). After that three-year period, the state FEAT team continues to operate under the annual renewal of the FEAT curriculum license with technical assistance provided free of charge by the FEAT trainer as needed.

FEAT also works to include the largest non-English-speaking minority group in the United States through Spanish translations of FEAT training and technical assistance materials and Spanish-

language delivery of FEAT, when the parent advocacy organization on the state FEAT team has bilingual staff who can present FEAT in Spanish. At present, FEAT has been presented in Spanish in both Kansas and Rhode Island, with the format of delivery varying depending on the community in which it is delivered. For example, in Kansas, Spanish-language and English-language trainings are delivered simultaneously in different rooms during morning activities, whereas in the afternoons, community presenters are in a combined room with in vivo translations to English or Spanish for attendees. In Rhode Island, by contrast, Spanish-speaking families are less likely to attend a formally structured training, so Spanish-language FEAT content is separated into smaller content sections that are presented to small groups of families in community locations (for example, at a library or a restaurant with a play area for children) as *charlas*, or chats. These adaptations facilitate access to the FEAT content in ways that met the needs and comfort levels of the attendees.

VI. The Effectiveness of FEAT

A team of researchers, including authors of the current paper, evaluated the effectiveness of FEAT in several stages across multiple years, including (1) a mixed-methods pilot study that assessed the intermediate-term influence of FEAT on attendees in 2012 and (2) a quasi-experimental (attendees and non-attendees), mixed-methods intervention efficacy study on the short- and intermediate-term (one-year) impacts of FEAT from 2013 to 2016. Although randomized controlled trials are often considered the “gold standard” in intervention studies, we used quasi-experimental methodology to investigate the efficacy of FEAT (a) because of the need to customize FEAT to specific geographic communities and (b) to ensure that all who needed FEAT would not have to wait for the next training to receive information and support.

In a 2012 statewide study of FEAT across urban, suburban, and rural communities in Kansas, survey data indicated that participants rated their expectations for employment as “average” and knowledge of employment resources as “above average,” using a 5-point Likert scale, one to two years after attending the program (Francis and others 2013). This finding was encouraging, considering the low expectations participants reported before attending FEAT. Follow-up data also indicated that English- and Spanish-speaking FEAT attendees across urban, suburban, and rural communities accessed employment support services (including case management, job coaching, assistive technology, and community-based services waivers) and used FEAT resources (FEAT technical assistance and information packets). Two-thirds perceived that FEAT had helped their family member with a disability gain or maintain competitive employment. Further, survey data from a larger quasi-experimental study conducted in Kansas from 2013 to 2016 comparing the outcomes of FEAT attendees and non-attendees found that family participants rated their expectations and knowledge as significantly higher one month after training. However, despite improvements from before the training, expectations were not maintained one year after the training, though knowledge was (Gross 2017). A key takeaway from this research is that although FEAT attendees’ expectations were higher than those of non-attendees in the short term, FEAT’s impact on expectations was not maintained over time to the degree that its impact on knowledge was.

In addition to quantitative data, attendees also provided valuable qualitative data about the influence of FEAT through open-ended comments on the pre- and post-training surveys. Before attending

FEAT, participants generally expressed dismal perspectives regarding the employment options available to people with disabilities. After attending FEAT, participants expressed improved outlooks. The callout box provides examples of attendees' comments.

Before attending FEAT	After attending FEAT
"I feel there are employment options out there, but [I'm] not sure what they are or how to access them."	"We started looking for employment and volunteer opportunities because of the reasons that you made us aware of. So we really appreciate the training you gave us very, very much."
"Options are limited, especially when I hear more 'he can't do that' than what he can do from his transition teacher."	"I think [FEAT] is something that I really need to be a part of as a case manager, as well as a parent of a child that is transitioning."
"Schools limit us on 'realistic' options or traditional jobs."	"Employment options for individuals with disabilities are much better than what I used to imagine (it was bleak!!)"

Sources: Francis and Gross (2017), and Gross and Francis (2016).

In addition, when asked what they believed were the top five barriers to employment before attending FEAT, participants often identified subjective characteristics of people with disabilities, such as a lack of social skills, inadequate job experience, and overly high support needs. When asked the same question after attending FEAT, participants were more likely to identify systemic barriers to employment, such as lack of access to supportive services, lack of employer flexibility, and low expectations from society regarding work for people with disabilities (Francis and others 2014b).

As FEAT expands to additional states, each new implementing state uses the same core questions for its training and the same evaluation forms for participants seeking technical assistance. In addition, each state FEAT team is taught how to use the fidelity of implementation checklist, which is a key part of teaching the team about the essential components of FEAT and how to ensure that they do not deviate too far in implementation practices and principles, such as discussing employment options in sheltered workshops during FEAT training. Each state's adapted FEAT curriculum is reviewed annually by the implementation team's FEAT trainer to ensure that the curriculum is aligned with the key principles of FEAT (encouraging competitive integrated employment over reliance on benefits alone) and is up-to-date with regard to eligibility information for resources. Finally, research support and materials from the quasi-experimental research are made available to state FEAT teams that want to assess participant outcomes. Because most states do not have money for long-term or extensive qualitative research, state FEAT teams often use a short version of the short-term outcomes survey from previous FEAT research, which includes questions on expectations about competitive employment for people with disabilities and knowledge of available resources to support employment. This provides the state FEAT team with data on outcomes that they can report to their funding agency and state partners.

VII. The Expansion of FEAT

To date, FEAT has been successfully implemented in five states: Kansas, Rhode Island, Nebraska, Indiana, and Oklahoma. Across those states, the funding sources and state partnerships differ. FEAT programs in Kansas, Rhode Island, and Nebraska have operated statewide, with face-to-face

training and technical assistance. FEAT was originally developed and tested in Kansas in 2010 using funding from the state's Medicaid Infrastructure Grant and has continued to be implemented with the support of several funding sources since then. In 2014, FEAT expanded to Rhode Island in partnership with the state's UCEDD and PTI to address concerns from the Department of Justice on violations of the Olmstead Act (*U.S. v. Rhode Island*, 2014). In 2018, the Nebraska PTI, with funding from state vocational rehabilitation agencies for pre-employment transition services, began implementing FEAT.² In 2019, Indiana began implementing FEAT with funding for regional training through the AWS Foundation, and Oklahoma began implementing FEAT statewide with funding from the state developmental disability council. Indiana and Oklahoma, having just begun implementing FEAT in mid-2019 and completed their curricula and train-the-trainer events before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, made some changes to the delivery of FEAT as a result.

The expansion of FEAT to a total of five states has presented some challenges. When implementing FEAT in a new state, the culture of the state must be considered. "Culture of the state" includes many different factors, such as the size of the state, how urban or rural it is, the racial/ethnic makeup of its population, how well state and local agencies and organizations collaborate, and the makeup and systemic knowledge of the state FEAT team members. This challenge is in actuality part of what makes FEAT so effective: it is tailored to each state and even to each of the state's diverse communities in which it is implemented. This tailoring encourages FEAT to best serve its unique community, whether urban, suburban, or rural, and account for characteristics such as the predominant language in that area.

Identifying and managing funding sources to support the ongoing implementation of FEAT can also be a challenge. However, national implementation of FEAT would address that challenge and bridge the gap between youth services that exist state to state. Given that each state has its own transition programs and state-specific resources, the success of youth with disabilities varies depending on where they reside. FEAT would provide a cohesive transition program, customized to each state, to enhance and promote collaboration within the state's existing support system of agencies and organizations for youth in transition. In addition, FEAT would provide families and youth with the knowledge and confidence to be full participants in the transition process, including youth who are no longer in school and often are disconnected from the continued transitional services needed to achieve employment.

National implementation would require funding to support the train-the-trainer model as well as the adaptation and delivery of FEAT in each state. Current expansion efforts in the five states have been effective and have been standardized, so there is no need for a proof-of-concept pilot. However, research has been limited to assessing outcomes only up to one year after FEAT, and conducting long-term research is out of reach for parent advocacy organizations. National implementation buoyed by a long-term quasi-experimental research project (follow-up research up to three years

² Pre-employment transition services were implemented with the passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014. Under this act, state vocational rehabilitation services agencies must set aside 15 percent of their federal funds to provide these services to students with disabilities who are eligible or potentially eligible for vocational rehabilitation services. See the appendix for a table showing the alignment of the FEAT training model with pre-employment transition services.

after FEAT) to assess FEAT's long-term impact on employment and quality of life would provide essential evidence to support its efficacy on a broad scale.

VIII. The Sustainability of FEAT

Once FEAT is established within a state, the state FEAT team partners need to advocate for funding to sustain the program. Ongoing costs to deliver FEAT include support for the organization leading state FEAT training and technical assistance efforts, including (1) costs for staff time; (2) any associated costs for establishing training sites and activities, such as room rental or interpreters; and (3) a \$1,000 annual licensing fee. The Kansas state PTI, Families Together, Inc., has implemented FEAT for over 10 years and has sustained the work by pooling resources and costs with other state partners, including (1) the state developmental disability council, (2) vocational rehabilitation, (3) the department of education and office of special education, (4) Medicaid, (5) workforce development centers, and (6) federal and private foundation grants. Because the laws that govern many of these state agencies require them to collaborate with other state and community organizations in the conduct of their work, it is advantageous for them to partner to support youth's employment outcomes. It is through such partnerships that it is possible to provide FEAT free of charge to all attendees.

Sustainability of FEAT also includes consideration of how to address ongoing challenges in implementation. With FEAT expanded to five states, each with varying forms of implementation, the FEAT consulting team led by Dr. Gross has established quarterly phone calls reminiscent of a community of practice for all FEAT state training teams to (1) address issues of concern in implementation, such as outreach and recruitment strategies, potential sources of ongoing funding, and training in the era of COVID-19; (2) share strategies for success and sustainability; and (3) support new FEAT states in learning from other states as they adapt and implement the intervention.

IX. Conclusion

FEAT provides transition-age youth with disabilities and the families and professionals who support them essential information to increase their expectations for competitive integrated employment and their knowledge of resources that support attaining and maintaining employment. FEAT uses a state-specific curriculum implemented by a family disability advocacy organization trusted by families and professionals in the state, making it an extremely effective way to reach families of youth with disabilities in transition. Customization of FEAT to meet the needs and demographic makeup of each community increases this effectiveness. In addition, research has shown that FEAT can produce sustained change in participants' expectations for employment and knowledge of resources, two essential prerequisites for achieving employment.

Implementing FEAT nationally would help to support youth with disabilities and their families to more actively participate in transition, understand the resources that support employment, and successfully make the transition to employment instead of "graduating to the couch." In the future, FEAT may serve as a model for the development of additional training curricula that focus on other essential domains of adulthood, such as community living or postsecondary education/training.

Developing additional curricula with implementation and outcomes research would provide a test of the training model as applied to a new content area and could provide support to individuals with disabilities and their families across key areas of transition planning and service provision in adulthood.

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Appendix

Alignment of FEAT with pre-employment transition services

FEAT curriculum and activities alignment	
Pre-employment transition required services	
Job exploration and counseling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth Session Day 1: identifying strengths, interests, support needs, and potential jobs/careers • “Discovering Passions” family activity: identifying strengths, interests and potential jobs/careers • Part 1: discussion of supported and customized employment options (carved, created, resource ownership, self-employment, employer-initiated diversity efforts)
Work-based learning experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part 1, afternoon speakers: employees, employers, entrepreneurs
Counseling on postsecondary opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition services section • School to work • School to postsecondary education/training • Part 2: discussion of providers, services, benefits, information to support employment • Part 2, afternoon speakers: representatives from services, programs, and benefits
Workplace readiness training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition services section • Pediatric to adult health care • Youth Session Day 2: self-advocacy and disability disclosure on the job
Instruction in self-advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth Session Day 2: self-advocacy and disability disclosure on the job • Information for parents/families and antidiscrimination laws
Pre-employment transition authorized services	
Strategies to increase independent living and inclusion in the community and workplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocating for at least 20 hours a week of competitive integrated employment • Promoting customized employment • Encouraging teachers and service providers to attend • Developing and following up with the plan for employment and individual and group technical assistance at workforce development centers (building family and community capacity)
Develop and improve strategies to promote independent living, participation in postsecondary experiences, and sustained competitive integrated employment for people with intellectual and other significant disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training state parent advocacy organizations in developing and delivering the state-based version of FEAT, increasing their capacity to support youth with disabilities through the transition to adulthood • Incorporation of LifeCourse Framework tools when adopted by the state or use of similar planning activities provided by FEAT
Provide training to vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors, school transition staff, and others supporting people with disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging attendance of teachers and service providers (VR counselors, community rehabilitation providers, case managers, workforce development professionals, etc.) related to those services described in Part 2 to attend the whole training as well as speak in the afternoon about their programs • Providing training to families (including parents, guardians, siblings, and grandparents) on supporting their family member with a disability
Disseminate information on innovative, effective, and efficient approaches to implement pre-employment transition services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Piloting, in Indiana, an adapted FEAT curriculum and model that provides student-centered training and activities as an approved pre-employment transition services provider for VR services as a way of directly reaching more youth in transition

FEAT curriculum and activities alignment	
<p>Coordinate activities with transition services provided by local education local education agencies (LEAs) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducting outreach directly to schools and local special educators in the communities in which FEAT trainings are held, encouraging educator, family, and youth attendance
<p>Apply evidence-based findings to improve policy, procedure, practice, and preparation of personnel</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging youth with disabilities, their families, teachers, and service providers (related to those described in Part 2) to attend the whole training • Inviting community service, benefits, and information providers to speak in the afternoon about their programs
<p>Develop model transition demonstration projects</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FEAT state-adapted curriculum and train-the-trainer model applied across expansion states • Use of parent advocacy organizations as state FEAT trainers
<p>Establish or support multistate or regional partnerships that involve states, LEAs, designated state units, developmental disability agencies, private businesses, or others</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnering with schools, VR, workforce development, developmental disability services, Medicaid, and other community service providers who can support employment to present information and share about their services when FEAT is in their community • Promoting capacity building in partnerships with parent advocacy organizations (such as parent training and information centers) in the state around issues related to transition and competitive employment
<p>Disseminate information and strategies to improve the transition to postsecondary activities among those who are traditionally unserved</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spanish-language training delivery and translation of materials • Flash drives (or other online shared storage management) with resources for participants • Training materials handouts • Web resources • Steps to employment