

Roles and Experiences of Senior Staff During Director Transitions at University Centers of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities

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Summary

Several University Centers of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs) across the country have recently faced the opportunity and challenge of transitioning to new leadership as directors retire or pursue new professional opportunities. During director transitions, the senior staff of the UCEDD take on additional leadership roles and administrative tasks to ensure continuity of the Center. Once a new director takes office, these same staff members provide the new director with an orientation and introduction to the Center. Staff perform these activities in addition to their regular work, which continues through the transition. The longevity and depth of the roles taken by staff members, as well as the overall success of a transition, depends greatly on the type of director transition – be it a seamless promotion from within or period of vacancy or interim directorship during a national search. This report finds that while senior staff in Centers that promote from within face few extra duties, staff in Centers with vacant or interim directors take on many duties and roles beyond their regular work, including participating in searches for the new director, ensuring program continuity, providing orientation and onboarding to new or interim directors, and continuing overall Center management.

Introduction

UCEDDs are 67 federally-funded and university-affiliated research, training, and service Centers across the United States, with at least one Center in every state and territory. They are authorized by the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000 and overseen by the Administration on Developmental Disabilities (ADD). The Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD) serves as the technical assistance provider for the UCEDD network, under contract from ADD.

This report responds to technical assistance needs from the network of UCEDDs regarding succession planning and leadership development. Recent years have seen an increase in the number of retiring or otherwise transitioning UCEDD directors, many of whom have held their posts for decades or were the only director in the Center's history. With transitions occurring across the network and presenting obvious challenges to program quality and continuity, AUCD undertook a series of activities to gain additional information about the process and associated challenges and suggested practices.

In this activity, AUCD interviewed senior staff – associate directors, training directors, and project directors – at UCEDDs who have recently experienced a director transition in order to ascertain the roles that these staff members play in managing the UCEDD during a transition.

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Senior staff typically remain at the UCEDD during the transition and often take on roles to sustain the Center's overall productivity and activities specific to the leadership transition itself. In this role, these staff are a valuable resource to help us understand a director transition from beginning to end. Beyond the information gained about their roles and activities, many senior staff were also eager to share suggestions and lessons learned about director transitions that could inform future transitions planning. These suggestions are included at the end of this report.

Methodology

AUCD staff identified 15 UCEDDs who have experienced a director transition within the past 5 years and sent emails to the current directors requesting that they each identify a key senior staff member who would be able to speak about the overall and individual staff experience during the transition period. Based on the responses, AUCD staff conducted interviews with 8 of the identified staff members. Interviews took approximately 30 minutes and asked the following questions:

Questions:

1. Who do you feel were key players in the transition process within your UCEDD? What roles did they play?
2. What role did you play during the transition:
 - a. before the previous director left?
 - b. during the search?
 - c. after the new director began?
 - d. If your role(s) changed during the transition, were you prepared for the role(s)?
3. Was your input or other staff members' input sought? How?
4. What steps were taken within the UCEDD to ensure a continuation of both short-term and long-term projects and activities during the change of directors?
5. How did the transition affect your UCEDD's progress or ability to continue its work?
6. Was there any connection between your UCEDD's organizational chart / structure and your UCEDD's ability to continue progress during the time of transition?
7. At the time of transition did your UCEDD have an executive committee for transition?
 - a. If not, who was in charge of making key decisions regarding the transitional period?
 - b. If so, who was a part of this committee? What were the benefits to having this committee? What would you recommend to do differently in the future?
8. When transitioning between directors did your UCEDD have an interim director?
 - a. If not, who was in charge of making key decisions for the UCEDD?
 - b. If so, was this individual internal or external to the UCEDD? Also, what were strengths and weaknesses of having someone in this position?
9. What additional steps do you wish had been taken by the previous executive director?
10. What additional steps do you wish had been taken by the current executive director?
11. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Results and Discussion

The interviews revealed that the functions, roles, and duties of senior staff differ greatly depending on the circumstances of the transition, particularly the previous role of the new director and the period of time between directors. For some Centers, the transition was a seamless process in which an existing associate director advanced to the executive director position. For others, the transition involved an extensive search process and a period of time with an interim director or no director at all. Each of these types of transitions demand that senior staff take on significantly different duties. To best convey the differences in these roles, this report categorizes the evidence obtained through the interviews into three different types of transitions: immediate, interim, and vacancy. Although there are a relatively low number of interviewees in each group, there are thought to be representative of senior staff at UCEDDs. Additional interviews may be useful to substantiate the accuracy of their representations.

Immediate: In immediate transitions, one executive director passes responsibility directly to a successor, usually from within the Center or UCEDD network. In most cases the successor has been prepared for the role by the outgoing director through informal involvement and communication for an extended period of time. Familiar with the Center, the new executive director can quickly take on his or her new responsibilities. As such, senior staff are not typically required to take on additional duties to assist the new executive director.

In Centers with immediate transitions, the key players tend to be the preceding and succeeding directors. In Centers with enough time to plan for the transition, senior staff are included in the process, holding meetings with the preceding and succeeding directors to communicate changes and transition timelines, but interviewees did not consider themselves key players. Senior staff also tend to play little role in the selection of the new director, often because most staff in the Center assume that the associate director will take on the position.

Interviews also revealed that in these transitions most senior staff found the transition a success with no challenge to program continuity and using descriptors such as “calm and pleasant” to describe the transition. One interviewee expressed that the value of “growing your own leaders...since each UCEDD has its own culture”. Senior staff expressed that there was a level of respect and trust between the new director and staff members due to his or her ongoing knowledge and demonstration of the values and mission of the Center.

Although immediate transitions were generally successful, interviewees voiced some important concerns regarding honest communication and definition of duties. In cases of internal hiring, senior staff noted the importance of providing safeguards for staff members to provide honest feedback during the transition. In some cases, safeguards are made available through communications with the associate director or a dean, depending on the administrative home of the UCEDD. Interviewees also expressed concerns with the new director fully relinquishing the duties of his or her previous position in order to take on all of the necessary leadership and duties of the new one.

Interim: In interim transitions, the Center experiences some period of time without a permanent official director during which an interim director holds the position. The interim director is

sometimes internal to the Center, such as a senior staff member, and other times external to the Center, such as a college dean or hospital administrator. These transitions also appeared more likely to involve an out-of-Center or out-of-network successor.

In cases of both internal and external interim directors, the senior staff take on extra duties and become significantly more involved in the transition process. The magnitude of these extra duties depends on the strengths and weaknesses of the interim director. When a senior staff member is appointed interim director, he or she already understands the functioning and mission of the Center and his or her regular duties are transferred or shared with other UCEDD staff members – this places more operational duties on all staff but does not require orientation activities from them for the interim director. For Centers with external interim directors, senior staff take on orientation and onboarding activities to assist the interim director (and will repeat these duties for the new director) but take on fewer overall Center operational duties. In both cases, the senior staff take on a substantial role in the transition, such as participation in the search committee and ensuring the overall operation of the Center and continuity of individual projects. Cases such as these tend to place stress on the senior staff as they take on transition duties in addition to their regular duties. Despite these issues, one interviewee noted the importance of having an interim director when an immediate transition is not possible, particularly that interim directors allow the UCEDD to advocate at the university level and liaise with their funders, such as ADD and other state and federal agencies, and AUCD. .

In terms of program continuity, Centers with interim directors faced few problems continuing individual programs, but struggled to obtain new projects. Senior staff from interim transitions cited the knowledge of the remaining staff as source of program continuity, supported by a strong organizational structure without any other vacancies. Across all interviews, staff reported that the long term project directors held programs together without much disruption. However, while few senior staff reported problems with program continuity, almost all interviewees reported problems with program growth. With interim or vacant directors, the Centers struggled to leverage new funds and seek new projects. Centers continue previously existing projects, but with interim or new directors the staff are focused on management and operations of the Center rather than new projects and opportunities.

Vacancy: In vacancy transitions, Centers experience some period of time without a director or with an interim director unfamiliar with the Center, overwhelmed with other duties, or otherwise less involved with center management.

In vacancy transitions, the senior staff take on the roles of the executive director and are also key players in the transition process. They ensure program continuity and direction, work alone or in teams to make key decisions, participate in or chair the search committee, and continue their previous work. These same staff also take on orientation and onboarding once a new director assumes the post. Transitions that involve a director vacancy place the most significant roles and burden of duties onto senior staff.

Staff at these Centers report even greater challenges to program growth than Centers that experienced immediate or interim transitions. While they cited that programs were able to continue current initiatives due to the knowledge of the staff, a director vacancy stalls the growth

of future projects and programs due to both a shortage in staff time and a lack of authority to make executive decisions for pursuing future funding opportunities and therefore potentially limiting the growth or longevity of the Center.

Many senior staff also noted suffering stakeholder relationships during a director vacancy, the result of gaps in communication among entities during the transition process. Relationships that struggled included those with hospital/university administration, external funders, the state's developmental disability network partners, and the state government agencies and legislators. Staff noted that having strained relationships can be particularly prohibitive to their work within the community and require rebuilding of trust between the organizations after the vacancy is filled.

Recommendations and Ideas

Interviews for this report revealed a number of themes and ideas for possible future AUCD technical assistance activities for transitioning UCEDD directors.

Overall, the senior staff interviewed expressed that transparency and open communication were the best way to support the entire UCEDD staff. One senior staff even said that “new directors don't always immediately know that best way to communicate to move forward; some are completely engulfed and others completely withdraw and listen. Any method is fine, but the director needs to articulate their expectations to the staff”.

Interviewees often felt overwhelmed when tasked with orientation duties for new directors in addition to their regular responsibilities, and one interviewee had a creative solution. In this interviewee's Center, she had assigned 10% of her time to assisting the new director with orientation. This clear delegation of tasks and responsibilities allowed her to “feel valued versus being taken advantage of”. Most senior staff do not have orientation activities as part of their official duties, so must take on these responsibilities in addition to their regular duties.

Interviewees also made several recommendations for how new directors can successfully build relationships with Center staff. Sometimes relationship building is difficult, particularly in a vacancy transition when the staff become accustomed to autonomous work. Some suggestions included that new directors ask questions and listen to staff, include key people when making final decisions, recognize and use the skills of the people in the organization, and to take the time to learn from the existing staff and programs before making major changes. One staff member interviewed summed up the relationship building suggestions by stating that “having [Center staff] behind you is absolutely essential during the transition.”

In terms of technical assistance from AUCD, interviewees suggested that the central AUCD office provide more guidance to transitioning Centers without being explicitly asked. Many senior staff members are unfamiliar with AUCD before the transition begins; if AUCD reached out first they would know more about the resources AUCD can provide. Another interviewee suggested that AUCD offer a mentoring director to transitioning Centers to assist new and interim directors as well as the senior staff. Finally, an interviewee suggested that AUCD develop additional materials, such as a typical timeline for an effective transition process.

AUCD remains open to receiving recommendations for TA activities, which are then reviewed, discussed, and agreed upon by ADD and the Project Advisory Committee.