

The Perceptions of Past and Current UCEDD Directors on Transitioning in and out of the Role of UCEDD Director

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Summary

Several University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs) across the country have recently experienced transitions of new leadership, as directors retire or pursue new professional opportunities. Transitions in general can be stressful, but transitions of directors, especially individuals who have held the position for a long period, can present particular challenges to a program. This report summarizes the findings of a series of interviews of UCEDD directors who have retired or left their program in the past five years and of directors who have stepped into those positions in that same period. The success of the transition appears to depend on a variety of considerations, including the type of succession process (internal appointment vs. search) and the length and type of preparation. However, several external factors that are difficult to control also may play a role, and those are discussed here, as well.

Introduction

UCEDDs are federally-funded and university-affiliated research, training, and service centers. Sixty-seven UCEDDs operate across the country, with at least one in every state and territory. They are authorized through the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000, with regulatory authority and oversight provided by the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AIDD). The Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD) serves as the technical assistance provider for the UCEDD network, under contract from AIDD.

The UCEDD network has seen a significant turnover in leadership, with UCEDD directors retiring or otherwise moving out of their leadership positions. Many of these individuals have held their posts for many years, in some cases having been the only director in the center's history. With transitions occurring across the network, presenting 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 five directors who recently left their positions and five recently appointed directors. The goal was to hear their perceptions of the transition process (incoming or outgoing) as a means of deriving a set of recommendations to share with and, it is hoped, to benefit programs that will face similar transition processes in the near future.

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Methodology

AUCD staff identified 12 UCEDDs that had experienced a director transition within the past five years. From that list, five directors who left their positions and five directors who started in their positions were selected, representing a broad range of UCEDDs by size and geographic area. Seven different UCEDDs were represented. In three cases, the outgoing director and the incoming director were from the same program. Each of the 10 individuals was contacted by email and all were asked if they would be willing to participate in a telephone interview. Interview questions (see below) were shared as part of the request. All 10 individuals agreed. Individual interviews were arranged and conducted. Each person spoke openly and freely about his or her experiences. Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes in length, and they were organized around the following questions:

Former Directors

1. When and how did you initiate your transition process?
2. What role did you have in setting up or preparing for the transition of your university appointment and your UCEDD role?
3. Who were key players in the transition process at your UCEDD, University, and community, and what roles did they play?
4. Who made the final decision on your replacement and whose input was sought?
5. What specific steps did you engage in at your UCEDD, University, and community when preparing to leave?
6. What external resources if any did you utilize when transitioning?
7. What role, if any, did staff play in your transition?

New Directors

1. What was in place when you started in your position that was most helpful?
2. What information and materials would have been helpful as you stepped into your position?
3. Prior to taking the position of UCEDD Director, what would you personally have done to better prepare yourself for the position?
4. What did your predecessor do that was helpful in your transition to your new position, and what additional steps do you wish that he/she would have taken prior to leaving?
5. What advice do you have for other directors who may be preparing for leaving, that you believe would make future transitions easier for their successors?
6. Are there roles or actions that ADD or AUCD could take that you think might help in future transitions at UCEDDs?

Results and Discussion

Former Directors

In all five cases, these individuals had served as director for a lengthy period, with most of them having been the director since the UCEDD's inception. Three of the individuals, who were retiring, were engaged in a reasonably long transition process, and two of them—who were moving to new positions-- had a limited transitional time available to them.

The process for securing a successor varied across the programs. In two cases, a national search was conducted; in one program, an internal search process was used. The universities at the other two programs appointed the successor from within. Two of the three national searches resulted in problems, forcing the university to conduct new searches. As a result, the length of the transition process varied, ranging from several months to at least two years.

The role of the outgoing director in these decisions also varied across programs. Most of them provided considerable input and advice to university officials about the process. However, success was mixed, with several variables affecting the outcome. Those factors included the strength (and “goodness of fit”) of available internal candidates, the relationship between the UCEDD director and his/her supervisor (dean, vice-president, etc.), and the university's hiring practices. Moreover, in more than one situation, university officials who were key players in the search process changed during that process. Some decisions were altered as the result of new administrators entering the picture.

The key players in the transition process also varied, depending on the university structure and the decision to appoint from within versus to conduct a formal search. In most cases, however, the outgoing director played a strong role in the succession process. The other reliable key player was the academic officer (dean or vice-president) who served in a supervisory capacity over the UCEDD. That individual's influence was particularly strong when successors were appointed without a search. Also playing important roles were members of the UCEDD management staff and, in places where searches were conducted, members of the search committee. Advisory councils typically played indirect, relatively minor, roles.

The steps that outgoing directors took when preparing to leave depended on the time they had available between the decision and their departure. In the three situations where time was available, the outgoing director met on several occasions with the putative (or named) incoming director, “walking” them through files and, in particular, introducing his/her successor to important state and community partners. Two of the retiring directors remained at the UCEDD in a diminished capacity, making themselves available to their successor as needed.

In only one case did the outgoing director discuss specific external resources he/she used in the transition. That person requested a technical assistance visit through AUCD/AIDD, noting it to have been a “wise move” and clearly beneficial.

Finally, concerning the role staff played in transition, in most cases, this role was limited to senior management team. Their role ranged from providing feedback on a prospective internal candidate to serving on a search committee.

New Directors

All but one individual spoke to the stability of the center as something they found helpful as they began their new jobs. That stability was manifested by such things as a strong management team and, in particular, a strong financial portfolio. There was one notable exception, articulated by one director who spoke of significant challenges coming in to the job as the result of a neglected and deteriorating infrastructure.

The “new” directors interviewed had been on the job, in most cases, for at least two years. In looking back, their responses about materials and information that would have been helpful ran the gamut, with one person saying that “everything “ was available and another person stating that virtually nothing had been done. The remaining three participants wished that they would have had greater clarity on budgets, a clear organizational chart, more information on agreements with staff and other units within the university, and a better sense of the overall picture of the UCEDD. Their perspectives varied with their own prior role within or outside the UCEDD, but even those who had served in an associate director position came to realize there were things they did not know or understand.

In response to the question about steps they might have taken to better prepare themselves prior to starting their jobs, new directors generated several ideas. Two people said they would have taken time to understand the financial and personnel rules within the university. A third person, who had been hired from outside the UCEDD network, would have visited other centers. This individual also spoke to the value of better understanding the university’s personnel (HR) system. One respondent, after being named as the incoming director, held short, individual meetings with each of the staff, finding that activity to have been “very important” and “helpful.”

Concerning steps that the new director’s predecessor took that were helpful in the transition, two respondents spoke to the value of being introduced to key people in the state. Those two individuals also appreciated time to meet with the out-going director and to better understand the center’s financial issues. One new director wished he/she had had the chance to talk with the outgoing director about that person’s “transformation” as director. A second new director had wanted “an honest list of issues” confronting their center. As with other questions, answers to this question varied with the center and the new director’s access to the outgoing (or former) director.

The question about advice for other directors preparing to leave their positions generated a fair amount of energy. Three of the respondents spoke to the importance of succession planning, including grooming a replacement from within. One person cited the mantra, “The day that you take your job is the day that you should prepare to start leaving your job.” Several specific

recommendations along those lines were: “Make sure there are others in the management structure who know what you do. Try to be as transparent as possible.” “Make sure your boss/university understands what your UCEDD is and what it does.” Individuals also advised outgoing directors to organize and summarize information, pruning old files. Finally, one respondent suggested that outgoing directors write a letter to their successor, discussing things they have learned and issues that remain.

Regarding actions that ADD or AUCD could take to ease future transitions, several new directors credited the new director orientations as having been helpful to them, particularly around the need for basic information. However, they also found the orientation insufficient to meet the depth of their specific needs; moreover, there was a long gap sometimes between their appointment and the orientation. Thus, several new directors recommended the assignment of a mentor to help them adjust over the first several months and to provide clear answers to complex, sometimes sensitive, questions—including beyond the initial adjustment period. Other suggestions included (a) having AUCD provide a packet of helpful information to new directors upon their appointment, and (b) using the Leadership Institute (at the University of Delaware) as a way of dealing extensively with transition issues. The general feeling is that AUCD is well positioned to provide the kind of support and technical assistance needed by new directors, and that AIDD should fund them to do so.

Summary and Recommendations

The vantage point of outgoing and incoming directors differs, naturally, as does the needs of each individual. The director who is leaving typically hopes for the person who follows to be successful. To some degree, the director who is leaving can influence that outcome: by leaving behind a clear and clean trail of paperwork and processes, by leaving with a strong program in place (financially and programmatically), and, especially, by developing and implementing a clear succession plan.

Programs that have a person on staff (almost invariably an associate director) who has been groomed for succession to the directorship appear to have an advantage over other programs without such a process in place, at least in terms of ease of initial transition. However, other factors play a major role in the outcome—in particular, the process that the university chooses to use, viz., internal appointment vs. internal search vs. external search. There are examples where associate directors have stepped into the directorship without missing a beat and yet other situations where highly capable associate directors did not fit neatly into their new role. Therefore, even when outgoing directors worked with their direct supervisors (dean or vice-president) to have their (prepared and “groomed”) successor appointed, there may appear to be a smooth transition on the surface, with problems down the road.

Of course, a national search does not guarantee a successful outcome, either. The interviews yielded advice to current directors contemplating retirement (or a move out of their UCEDD) to

get clarity on who will be on the search committee and to be assertive with university officials about being involved in that process. One individual recommended as a useful exercise the following: Imagine the worst thing that can happen during your transition and what you can do to prevent that from happening. It is also worth highlighting the positive experiences of a former director who planned his/her retirement well in advance and who sought a technical assistance visit to work with the staff and map out a plan.

The *newly hired* director, on the other hand, confronts a complex array of needs from the first day on the job. This individual needs access to financial, personnel, and programmatic information, as well as answers to questions and support from people they can trust. If they were hired from within the program, they already have knowledge of their program's history and, minimally, basic operations, and they also know most or all of the staff. However, with a shift in position, there are important things they have never been told but now need to know, their relationships with staff have shifted, and there are key people within the state and university who they have never met or interacted with. It is often difficult to impossible to acquire vital information from within the program. Thus, an external mentor may be a very practical support mechanism for new directors.

The idea of a mentor may be especially valuable when the new director has not previously worked within the UCEDD network. UCEDDs are challenging enough to operate for someone familiar with the legislated requirements and the AIDD mechanisms. For someone new stepping in, who may not have even worked closely with a UCEDD, the learning curve is steep, and the demand for answers to even basic questions is great.

A summary of key recommendations follows:

- Directors who are leaving can influence the success of the newly hired director by:
 - leaving behind a clear and clean trail of paperwork and processes,
 - leaving with a strong program in place (financially and programmatically),
 - developing and implementing a clear succession plan, and
 - having a person on staff groomed for succession to the directorship.
- Directors who are leaving are advised to:
 - get clarity on who will be on the search committee and be assertive with university officials about being involved in that process,
 - imagine the worst thing that can happen during your transition and think about what you can do to prevent that from happening,
 - plan your retirement well in advance, and
 - consider a technical assistance visit to work with the staff and map out a plan.
- Newly hired directors need access to:
 - financial information;
 - personnel information;

- programmatic information regarding needs, history, basic operations and the university home;
- people they can trust in answering questions and proving support;
- knowledge of who are key people within the state and university; and
- an external mentor from the UCEDD network.

In summary, the old saw “If you have seen one UCEDD, you have seen one UCEDD,” also applies to some degree to transitions of UCEDD directors. The needs, history, and geography of the program, and its relationship to the home university, all affect the direction and outcome of a search/appointment of a new director. So do the degree to which the program has developed a succession plan, the time left in a director’s tenure, and the availability of qualified, interested internal candidates. No two programs or directors appear to have approached the task in exactly the same fashion.