

Making Policies That Govern the Employment of People with Disabilities More Socially and Economically Responsible

Susanne M. Bruyère, Industrial and Labor Relations Extension, Richard V. Burkhauser, Policy Analysis and Management, and David Stapleton, Cornell Center for Policy Research, combine powerful research with effective outreach and policy analysis. In 1998, they began building a Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) with a five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research.

RRTC provides a coordinated research, training, and dissemination effort to improve stakeholder and policymaker understanding of environmental, policy, and economic factors affecting the employment of people with disabilities. Each member of this cross-college collaboration brings a specific set of experiences and perspectives to the issues of disability, employment, and related policies: Burkhauser specializes in economic research, Bruyère in outreach and extension, and Stapleton in policy analysis.

Burkhauser shows that there are two factors responsible for work disability: the onset of a health-related functional limitation and the social environment facing the worker. Burkhauser's research team looks specifically at how changes in the social environment can affect work outcomes for people with functional limitations. Using the tools of economic research—large, multiperiod data—Burkhauser's team follows a sample of working-age men and women from the time a health condition first began to affect their ability to work.

The research estimates the effect of key policies on their employment and on the application for social security disability benefits. Burkhauser's research reveals that there is an enormous variation in the timing of applications for benefits. The researchers believe that this is due, in part, to social policies. For example, employer accommodation of such workers significantly delays a worker's application for disability benefits. In states where the acceptance rates (the share of disability applicants who are accepted in a given year) are high, workers apply more quickly for benefits following onset of disability. Using this evidence, Burkhauser has recommended changes in disability policies so that they focus on keeping working-age people with disabilities in the labor force instead of providing benefits to those who leave employment.

Bruyère's role is to ensure that the research is guided by stakeholder concerns and that the research results are accessible and useful to the stakeholders—policy makers, researchers, people with disabilities and their families, and communities. The project began with the assumption that the commonly used data on disability and employment was reliable. However, the project team's interactions with the disability community (through informal mechanisms such as conferences and conversations and through formal mechanisms, including board membership and advice) revealed that the data was not as widely accepted as they had thought.

Therefore, the project team began by investigating the trustworthiness of the data and educating their publics about their findings. This temporary “derailing” of their intended plan produced a more complex understanding of issues vital to the field of disability policy, and it has enabled a richer, more confident reengagement with the project's agenda and the stakeholders. Similarly, the project's various workshops, the 2000 Summer Institute in Ithaca, and the 2001 Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., helped to bring the perspectives of stakeholders to bear on one another, informing the scope and direction of the research and its dissemination.

Because the stakeholders are the disability community, dissemination and accessibility of the research in this project take on new intellectual and logistical challenges. How, for example, does one translate data sets and charts into Braille? Bruyère works with blind economists and the National Braille Press to answer these and related questions. She is developing a website that will make the project's findings and materials available to a broader community.

The policy angle of the project is Stapleton's province. At the start of the project, he was with Lewin, a Washington, D.C.-based consulting firm that has a long history of relationships with the federal government in evaluating public policies related to health. His familiarity with both economic research practices and with the daily realities of the policy world better enabled the RRTC to fulfill its tripartite mission: research, outreach, and policy analysis and recommendations.

In a nation in which one in six people has a disability, and in which 40 percent of the workforce soon will be over the age of 50, the issues investigated, the multilevel conversation promoted, and the information shared by this project are as vital to the health and prosperity of the nation as they are to those of people with disabilities. This range of effects could not be achieved except through this kind of cross-college, multifunctional collaboration. As a top-flight research institution and the Land-Grant university of the State of New York, Cornell boasts faculty and staff who perform the disciplinary and functional integration that is central to Cornell's mission. Indeed, this project offers a powerful example of how Cornell's strengths in research and outreach can be integrated to better serve the university's multiple purposes.

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Susanne M. Bruyère, a rehabilitation psychologist, is director of the Program on Employment and Disability at the School of Industrial and Labor Relations—Extension Division. She is currently project director and principal investigator of numerous research efforts, including the Rehabilitation Research Training Center (RRTC). She arrived at this field of study through personal experience: when she was sixteen, her brother was born with Down Syndrome, and that same year she started a job at the psychiatric hospital in her neighborhood. Bruyère pairs theory with practice in the belief that they do more together than either can alone.

Richard V. Burkhauser, the Sarah G. Blanding Professor and Chair of the Department of Policy Analysis and Management, uses the tools of applied microeconomic theory to study the behavioral and distributional consequences of public policy. His perspective on economics as a tool for investigating social and political issues has led him to seek out multidisciplinary and cross-college endeavors like the RRTC; he spearheads the research agenda of the project.

David Stapleton, director of the Cornell Center for Policy Research in Washington, D.C., left a tenured faculty position at Dartmouth College in order to pursue policy analysis, first with the Lewin Group and now with Cornell. As an economist, he uses economic methods to evaluate specific government policies and works with the government agencies that need the information.

The Program on Employment and Disability in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations—Extension Division administers the RRTC in coordination with the Department of Policy Analysis and Management in the School of Human Ecology and the Cornell Center for Policy Research in Washington, D.C.