

## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **VCU AWARDED \$1.75 MILLION GRANT TO HELP EMPLOY YOUTH WITH AUTISM**

RICHMOND, Va. (Sept. 15, 2008) – The National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research has awarded Virginia Commonwealth University a \$1.75 million grant to improve employment opportunities for high school and college-aged youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD).

The five-year project is a collaborative initiative between the VCU School of Education's Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC), the VCU School of Medicine, the VCU Department of Occupational Therapy, and the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS).

Under the direction of RRTC Director Paul H. Wehman, Ph.D., "VCU ASD Career Links" will examine: the effectiveness of community-based vocational training on job outcome, tenure, pay and benefits; needs of the increasing number of people with ASD pursuing higher education; whether Personal Digital Assistant, or PDAs, can help people with ASD find jobs; and the efficacy of Vocational Rehabilitation services and job placements among DRS clients with ASD.

The project will work with four school districts in the Richmond-area and the Faison School for Autism, which will enroll about 200 youth age 18 to 22 with ASD in the program; Bon Secours Health System Hospital in Richmond; colleges and universities throughout Virginia, and staff from DRS.

Autism is a life-long developmental disability that affects the ability to form relationships, communicate, develop interests, and respond to life's changes and stresses.

Five different disorders are under the umbrella of Autism Spectrum Disorder. They are autism, Asperger's disorder, pervasive developmental disorder – not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), Retts disorder, and childhood disintegrative disorder.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, the number of high school students diagnosed with autism has been increasing with almost 194,000 students ages six through 21 nationwide being identified as having autism and receiving special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

“These young people create a significant need for vocational rehabilitation intervention in the decade ahead,” said Dr. Wehman.

Currently many people with ASD continue to be unemployed, according to the National Organization on Disability. A study of 68 young adults with ASD and a mean age of 29 found that a third worked and almost half were unemployed. In 2005, the U.S. Department of Education’s Rehabilitation Services Administration found fewer than 2000 individuals with ASD received Vocational Rehabilitation. Yet in Virginia, 1,135 total clients were enrolled between 2000 and 2007; of these more than half were working when their cases were closed. The state’s success is likely due to DRS’s emphasis on youth with disabilities—an emphasis not shared by all state Vocational Rehabilitation systems across the nation.

The Autism Society of America reports that many people with autism need job coaches to be employed in integrated work settings. Staying on task and having appropriate work-related behavior are typically the major issues with which a well-trained job coach can help someone with autism or Asperger’s to become a good employee. Once they are comfortable in the job, they often receive accolades from employers.

“We need to examine why people with ASD are unemployed,” said Dr. Wehman.

Once individuals with ASD leave school they no longer have a special education entitlement and thus if many are perceived as “too disabled” many may not be found eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation Services.

“It is critical for the individual with ASD to start working with the adult vocational service provider, like the state vocational rehabilitation agency, years before leaving school,” said Dr. Wehman. “Failure to make timely contact with the vocational service provider may result in under or no employment of the student. Many individuals with ASD cannot obtain or keep a job without a network of family, friends, as well as service and support personnel.”

“We look forward to this project as it will cite what we do well, but more importantly it will note where we can improve in responding to the needs of those consumers with ASD, one of our fastest growing populations, said DRS Commissioner James A. Rothrock.”

Also, employment for individuals with ASD is frequently influenced by the public’s opinion about whether or not people with severe disabilities should work in the community. There may be negative perceptions that support outdated statements like: “the disabled are too weak to work” or “the handicapped need to be overprotected”; these perceptions while unfounded usually can influence hiring and retention practices.

And many people with disabilities have been slow to decide to go to work, because of fears linked with the loss of financial and medical benefits.

“The large number of individuals with ASD who will exit secondary special education programs and attempt to enter the workforce over the next decade will create tremendous challenges for state Vocational Rehabilitation agencies,” said Dr. Wehman. “Many agencies across the nation lack experience with the varied and complex support needs of this growing population.” An asset in this project is DRS’s prioritization on youth and early involvement within the schools. This likely will allow an emerging “best practice” to be better defined.

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**About VCU and the VCU Medical Center:** *Virginia Commonwealth University is the largest university in Virginia and ranks among the top 100 universities in the country in sponsored research. Located on two downtown campuses in Richmond, VCU enrolls nearly 32,000 students in 205 certificate and degree programs in the arts, sciences and humanities. Sixty-five of the programs are unique in Virginia, many of them crossing the disciplines of VCU’s 15 schools and one college. MCV Hospitals and the health sciences schools of Virginia Commonwealth University compose the VCU Medical Center, one of the nation’s leading academic medical centers. For more, see <http://www.vcu.edu/www.vcu.edu>.*