

PRACTICE BRIEF

Effective Job-Seeking Preparation and Employment Services for College Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

This article describes the approach implemented by one university to mitigate typical barriers encountered by college students with disabilities when attempting to find post-graduation employment. The unique vocational program offered is reinforced by the successful employment outcomes and case studies discussed in this review. Over a span of five years, this approach yielded close to a 40% employment rate among graduates with disabilities. This is a significant percentage when considering the severity of disabilities within the target population and the national rates of employment for persons with disabilities. Recommended job-seeking preparation and employment services are outlined in this article with supporting literature. Implications for postsecondary institutions, disability services centers, state vocational rehabilitation counselors and researchers are provided.

Keywords: Vocational, employment services, internship

As a result of policy, attitudinal shifts, and labor market trends, the number of college students with disabilities (CSD) has risen over the years to represent 19% of all students attending postsecondary education (National Council on Disability, 2011). Unfortunately, the employment rate for college graduates with disabilities (52.7%) is still demonstrably below that of college graduates without disabilities (83.7%) (Erickson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2014). Moreover, these numbers may be deceptively high when considering that Dutta, Gervy, Chan, Chou, and Ditchman (2008) found professional employment rates at 19% for individuals with sensory/communication impairments, 16% for people with physical impairments, and 7% for individuals with mental impairments.

Part of the issue involves the intense focus in college on academic success, as opposed to the traditional development of work experiences, proven to increase post-graduation employment outcomes (Lindstrom, Doren, & Miesch, 2011; Raue & Lewis, 2011). It is assumed that CSD are intrinsically able to complete

an independent job search or tap into the general (non-disability expert) career services on campus, resulting in ill-equipped job seekers and generic job search activities (Lindsay, 2011). When job-seeking services and training are provided by disability agencies, they often involve the assistance of a job developer who is more accustomed to working with individuals with entry level employment opportunities (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2013), has not been trained in higher level or literature-supported job development activities, and may not have personally attained higher education themselves (Migliore, Hall, Butterworth, & Winsor, 2010).

Depiction of the Problem

Although career advisors and vocational rehabilitation counselors can provide guidance on appropriate career choices and résumé building, only 26% of 2- and 4-year degree granting postsecondary institutions are providing career or placement services targeted for

CSD and only 26% report working either formally or informally to a “moderate extent” with state vocational rehabilitation agencies and 37% to a “minor extent” (Raue & Lewis, 2011). In this climate, CSD are not aware of the unique job seeking strategies they can employ in order to sidestep common pitfalls (such as lack of ability to communicate and provide examples of field-specific skills abilities) and shine above the throngs of other eager, unemployed college graduates (McConnell et al., 2013). The purpose of this practice brief is to describe services implemented by an office of disability services (ODS) at a midsized state university in the Midwest to improve previously unacceptable employment outcomes of CSD prior to and after graduation.

Participant Demographics and Institutional Partners/Resources

Presently, the ODS provides employment services to a diverse population of students with disabilities, including individuals with mobility impairments (30.3%), sensory impairments (9.4%), and multiple disabilities (5.9%). Students learn about the program through ODS marketing efforts and encouragement by staff to students seeking other services. All services are voluntary and may be discontinued at any time. Between 2008 and 2013, 254 CSD elected to participate in employment assistance. Among those students, 106 have graduated and 42 (39.6%) are employed. Of those working, the top sectors of employment for employed graduates include human services (26%), STEM (21.4%), and government/public administration (16.7%).

Services are primarily implemented by the ODS vocational support coordinator (VSC) through a partnership between ODS and a professional development organization specifically serving CSD and minority students (Wright, 2014). The VSC often works intensely with CSD based on individual student needs and motivation. Services may also be provided by the university’s career services office, state vocational rehabilitation agency and other community/campus resources when appropriate, allowing the university-funded VSC to act in a coordinating capacity.

Description of Practice

Services provided by the VSC through the comprehensive vocational program include literature-supported, strengths-based strategies development (McConnell et al., 2013). The emphasized strategies (communication skills, disability knowledge, campus

involvement work experience, targeted job-seeking activities and resource building) are tailored to jobseekers with autism spectrum or significant visible disabilities. Combined, these strategies provide a well-rounded job search approach for successfully competing in the job market upon graduation, resulting in improved employment outcomes for students.

Communication Skills

Generally, effective and confident communication is the cornerstone of finding employment (Robles, 2012) and, therefore, the foundation of the program’s job seeking services. Whether making new friends in a student organization, meeting professionals in an internship, networking for hidden job leads, or presenting themselves effectively to hiring managers, students need to deliver information clearly, concisely, confidently, and persuasively. Once a job is obtained, retention and promotion decisions often hinge on internal and external communication. Students are encouraged to engage in diverse activities that promote face-to-face communication on a consistent basis and to practice interviewing with ODS and Career Services staff well before the first official interview. Other common opportunities endorsed include general and field-specific communication courses (Yale, 2014), classroom discussions, public speaking and Toast Masters.

Personal Disability Knowledge and Preparedness

Prior to and during college, there are several personal considerations for CSD to be aware of and realistically evaluate for successful post-degree employment. Often through the guidance of a disability benefits analyst and a VSC, CSD are encouraged to understand how employment will impact their benefits and readily available work incentives. The student and VSC consider individual needs in the home and at the job site. Assistive technology and personal care attendant services need to be addressed, as well as potential funding sources (whether employer, state vocational rehabilitation agency, or personal). CSDs need an accurate understanding of their strengths and limitations in order to develop appropriate goals and attain a college degree leading to an attainable job (Lindstrom et al., 2011). With better personal awareness, CSD can realistically compare personal stamina to job requirements, full time vs. part time employment, and telecommuting or flextime opportunities in order to create a viable pathway from studies to employment. All job-seeking students are recommended to complete a comprehensive review and plan with the VSC (see Appendix A).

Campus Involvement

Because campus involvement can foster professional skill sets that help round out résumés with minimal or unrelated work histories, all college students are encouraged to pursue these opportunities. During the early years, campus organizations can assist with the transition to college by providing a group of people with common interests. Later on, students may seek leadership roles and serve as peer mentors (Moreno & Banuelos, 2013). Ideally, these opportunities provide a chance to hone appropriate social and self-advocacy skills in a safe and supportive environment (Agarwal, Calvo, & Kumar, 2014). Unfortunately, this message is not always conveyed to or encouraged effectively in CSD, who may be redirected to focus their energies on academics alone. The program recommends CSD take advantage of multiple opportunities to be active and fully engaged on campus. With skills and confidence supported through community-building activities and organization involvement, many CSD have even taken on the difficult task of initiating their own student organizations, a process that takes considerable time, effort, and collaboration.

Work Experience

Although not always required by specific degrees, practicums and internships support skill development, networking opportunities, and relevant experience that can lead to job opportunities. Field experiences also cultivate confidence in a job interview when CSD are able to draw on previous demonstrations of skills and abilities. Outside of structured field experiences, students are able to volunteer in field-related areas or to complete service learning activities (Ramson, 2014). Both provide similar benefits to a field experience while also demonstrating a firm commitment to the student's field of study. Additional opportunities to demonstrate understanding and skills outside of community activities might include the completion of a thesis or electronic portfolio (Worley, 2011). These activities assist students in demonstrating abilities and building a track record of accomplishments when self-promoting to a potential employer.

Résumé Development

Although there are literally thousands of résumé resources available to college level job seekers, combining a skill-focused résumé with a self-marketing plan (see Appendix B) can help CSD stand out from other similarly qualified graduates while minimalizing job gaps or a sparse work history. Another typical exercise completed during the process involves CSD reviewing examples of résumés of varying quality.

Students then rate and critique the résumés, clarifying strong and weak résumé construction attributes.

Understanding Resources

The final piece prior to applying for jobs involves a CSD putting his or her individual resource puzzle together. The student may be requiring SSI/SSDI, Medicaid/Medicare, state vocational agency services, waiver programs, accessible transportation, accessible housing, orientation to a new environment, mobility devices, assistive technology, ASL interpreting/c-print, and/or personal care attendant services. These services often pull from different agencies that have very specific eligibility, timeline, and financial requirements. Students will benefit from having the knowledge of all the resources available, what s/he needs and is eligible for, and how to coordinate all of those moving parts in order to obtain and maintain appropriate employment (Lindstrom et al., 2011).

Job Leads

Once all of the above strategies are in place, the focus shifts to locating open positions and facilitating job interviews. Post-graduation employment, especially the first job in the field, is often obtained through networking. Students are encouraged to take every opportunity to network during classroom and community experiences (i.e., following up with guest speakers and professionals met through job shadowing or company tour experience). Students also register with the career services office for job leads, practice interviewing skills with unfamiliar professionals, feedback on résumés and presentation skills, and career fairs. In addition, job opportunities may be uncovered by discussing interests with fellow students and others within specific departments. Having a discussion with professors and advisors will inform all parties that the student is actively looking for employment, what s/he is specifically looking for in terms of a job, and what current positions exist. Students should investigate listservs, professional organizations, departmental bulletin boards and social networking sites for job postings.

Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

To highlight the unique program's guidance in action, two case studies of students with significant physical impairments in well-saturated career fields are provided. The students' names have been changed to maintain anonymity. Mara, a very determined individual with a complex physical disability, utilized a specially designed power wheelchair with fiber optic lights to maneuver around campus with only one finger and her voice. During her four years at the university,

Mara expanded her public speaking abilities, became involved in campus activities, obtained a position as an English tutor for students with disabilities, and completed three internships based on guidance from her VSC. After graduating with a B.A. in Mass Communications, specializing in Public Relations and with a 3.78 GPA, Mara continued to build her résumé by volunteering. Approximately one year after graduation, Mara obtained a position as a Communications Specialist for a private school.

Sophie, another student with significant physical limitations, participated in on-campus organizations and worked as a tutor in the university writing center while obtaining her undergraduate degree in English with a concentration in Professional Writing. Upon completion of her Bachelor's degree, she began a graduate program for Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL). The program offered several opportunities to complete practicums, internships and other related experience on campus. Additionally, Sophie completed an internship through the Workforce Recruitment Program and worked on campus editing papers written by Ph.D. students in engineering. Following graduation, Sophie combined part-time positions as a TESOL instructor, adjunct English instructor and Test of English as a Foreign Language exam grader until obtaining a full-time TESOL instructor position for a small university.

Implications and Portability

To further assess the impact of this or any employment service program and build a cache of evidence-based practices specifically targeting CSD, the authors recommend a comprehensive plan for evaluation integrated into the daily practices of the service provider. Record keeping of specific services, interactions, and outcomes must be tracked for all students served in order to analyze the variables and pinpoint effective practices. Student satisfaction and perceptions of services as well as employer feedback should also be surveyed regularly.

Ultimately, this article provides a blueprint for literature-supported activities to assist CSD find employment. Offices interested in replication should focus on engaging students early and intermittently over four to five years as opposed to rushing through several steps during the final term prior to graduation. For maximum outreach and impact, whether hiring a dedicated VSC is possible or not, ODS staff should disseminate their unique disability knowledge and best practices for working with CSD to career services, academic advisors, faculty, and community job placement specialists when possible.

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Appendix A

Example Comprehensive Review and Plan

Name: Temperance (Tempie) Potter

Date: 8/23/14

Major: MRC Severe Disabilities

Grad Date: 4/30/15

Minor: None

College: CEHS

Long Term Goals: Counselor at college level. Specialize in AT. Buy a house.

Short Term Goals: Volunteer more- elementary school, local rehabilitation agency.

Strengths: Communication, organization, presentation skills.

Weaknesses: Time management, networking.

Need To Work On: "Poker face"

Work Experience: Student Employee (10/12- present), daycare teacher, medical assistance, waitress

Volunteer Experience: Youth Art Program, 4 years

Activities: Employment Committee, DDIP

Projects: Created 200 page reference binder

Disability: Spina Bifida- manual wheelchair, service dog for pulling, can't lift/grab over shoulder height.

Self Marketing Profile: Done

Transportation: **Public Transit** Driver Drive Self

VR Services: **BVR** BSVI Worker's Comp Veterans None

Accommodations: Speakerphone/headset, WC access

Computer: Trackball mouse, Dragon Naturally Speaking

Personal Attendant: AM/PM at home, lunch toileting

Other: Service Dog- Lily

Experiences: **Internship** Job Volunteer Co-Op Any

Term: Fall Winter **Spring** Summer # of Hours: 40

Schedule: Any **M T W R F** S SU

Compensation: Paid Unpaid **Either** SSI SSDI

Location: Anywhere in two state radius

Type of Experience Desired: Full time internship at a university in Midwest

Student Homework: Work on résumé/cover letter, register with Career Services, investigate universities within the region and create a top 5 list to target.

VSC Homework: Review résumé and cover letter once sent in, check with Career Services on next mock interviewing event.

Additional Comments:

Next Appt: 9/13/14

Appendix B

WrightChoice U-ACT's Self-Marketing Plan Template

A self-marketing profile tells who you are, what you have to offer the job market, and can be used in a variety of situations. A self-marketing profile should include:

Skills: Choose one or two skills that are most marketable in your chosen field, such as Java programming or grant writing. Always be prepared to illustrate how you used your skills with stories from your work or academic experience.

Knowledge: You can have knowledge of an industry (banking), academic subject (Finance), region or culture (Japan), or organization/type of organization (military, non-profit, IBM). Your knowledge can come from professional, academic, or personal experience/background. For example, someone who worked in a family business during their formative years has knowledge of small business environments; someone who is an accomplished athlete may have knowledge of a particular sport (resulting in opportunities in sports management, equipment, events, etc.).

Experience: It is best to quantify experience in terms of years, whenever possible. Experience can be professional, volunteer, internship, or entrepreneurial. For example, working for several companies in sales may be represented as "five years of progressively responsible positions in marketing/sales."

Personal Qualities: Highlight qualities that are applicable to the job; being outgoing and extroverted are valuable in a sales position. "Show me, don't tell me" is the guideline for discussing qualities. Always illustrate claims with examples from your experience such as "I am especially innovative as evidenced by my approach to solving systems problems at XYZ company."

How to Use Your Profile

Elevator Speech

An "elevator speech" is a 30-60 second introduction that tells who you are as a professional, what you enjoy doing, and what you are looking for. It offers the opportunity to express your expertise and strengths, and to position your capabilities in the mind of the listener. In creating your "elevator speech" you need to be creative and innovative, yet tactful and professional. Keep in mind the finished product should take you no more than approximately 60 seconds to verbally recite and something that you are comfortable with so that you can draw upon it at any time, even an unexpected place like an elevator.

- I am a (professional/student/at the level of)
- With experience in (functions/capabilities)
- My strengths and interests include (unique activities and professional qualities)
- I have worked with/for (types of organizations/industries/fields)
- I am seeking an opportunity in...
- Do you know anyone who happens to work in that field?
- Would you be willing to keep an eye out for something that matches those qualifications?
- Do you know someone else I can contact who might be able to assist me?

This can be used in a variety of settings, such as a career fair

- It is a pleasure to meet you. I am particularly interested in the cosmetics industry and your firm is a recognized leader. I have had an internship (experience) in retail sales and am pursuing a degree in marketing from XYZ University's College of Business, where I specialized in international marketing (knowledge). I am very entrepreneurial, as evidenced by my success as an independent beauty consultant (qualities). I am also knowledgeable about Latin American business practices (knowledge) and speak Spanish (skills). Are there opportunities in your firm for someone with my qualifications?

Or to answer “Tell me about yourself” in an interview

- I hold a bachelor’s degree in Mass Communications with a minor in English from XYZ University and graduated with a 3.8 GPA. I am especially interested in Social Media and took three additional classes to learn more about how it is changing the field of marketing. During my senior year I did a co-op with an area non-profit that gave me the opportunity to use my editorial and marketing skills to revamp their website and social media presence. I am also very passionate about helping my community and continue to volunteer with Habitat for Humanity.