Speaking Center Consultants' Potentiality as Community Job Coaches for Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

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Particularly for adults with intellectual and or developmental disabilities who already face high rates of unemployment, communication and job development training are becoming increasingly essential for vocational success. For this reason, Peacehaven Community Farm, a sustainable living community in North Carolina whose mission is to connect adults with disabilities to the greater community, launched a job training program to assist in the acquisition of necessary skills to get a job. In the summer of 2019, Peacehaven Community Farm piloted an early version of their program entitled Julian and Friends, which aimed to train four to five adults with disabilities throughout a 10 week program, meeting twice weekly.

The curriculum in this programming centers around communication competencies, interview preparedness, and farming-related skills given the nature of Peacehaven Community Farm. Professionals from the community are invited to speak to the participants and provide mock interviews at the beginning of the 10 weeks and again at the end of the 10 weeks to evaluate growth. Each participant has a "job coach" who is their designated partner to help guide them through their activities and tasks. The participants are awarded certificates of completion at the end of the program and the hope is that they are able to obtain jobs as an end result.

What Can Speaking Centers Do?

Speaking Centers are well positioned to create or be involved in this type of programming in their local communities given the goals of the job preparedness curriculum, the need for job coaches, and the nature of Speaking Center consulting. Much of the curriculum centers around day-to-day communication skills in addition to interpersonal job skills. Speaking Centers train their consultants to identify these key skills (or lack thereof) in speaker presentations, and these communication competencies can easily be translated into vocational skills for successful employment, such as eye contact, nodding, and smiling.

Speaking Center consultants are also trained to troubleshoot in the moment and present advice in ways that best connect with the speaker. For example, at the start of the program, one of the participants was resistant to attending. He did not want to be in a structured learning environment as it was his summer break from school. Throughout the program, the job coaches learned to respond to this individual's needs and present materials in such a way that learning would be effective. As the program progressed, the participant was able to independently answer and respond to questions to evaluate what he had learned in previous sessions without prompting from a job coach. The implementation of videos and cartoons to explain the skills necessary was helpful for this particular participant in developing his skills and retaining information. In the same vein, Speaking

Center consultants are trained to identify and respond to the needs of the speakers that come through their centers. The adaptable nature of trained Speaking Center consultants makes this type of community engagement a natural fit to which consultants can translate their skills.

Recommendations

Speaking Centers who participate in such programming should emphasize practical job skills, such as teamwork, problem solving, and finding support and proper motivation (Butterworth, et. al, 2019). By emphasizing these skills that are imperative to daily independent living, participants will be better equipped to work in any environment.

To prepare Speaking Center consultants who participate in this work, consultants who serve as job coaches should be equipped by their leadership team (graduate assistants, directors). The leadership team should set expectations for the job coaches at the start of the program to provide support towards completion of tasks, but understand the end goal for allowing the participants to work independently (Brock, et al., 2016). The consultants should have an understanding of leading the participant to complete independent work, in the same way that consultants are trained to lead their peers towards independent work in consultations, rather than telling them the answers. Once the participants move on towards applying for a job upon completion of the program, they will no longer have the benefit of having a job coach to assist them with job-related tasks. Allowing the participants to adjust to working with other participants, in addition to working independently, will better equip them for working at and maintaining a job later. Note that this is a learning curve, and much of what is learned will be done through the actual work with the participants, as each individual may require a different approach.

Speaking Centers can prepare for this level of outreach by establishing working relationships with organizations in their community. Consultants should also be prepared to create and facilitate lesson planning, which generally consists of three different sections. Lesson plans generally start out with an icebreaker section, in which participants share something good that has happened in the last week or two. The middle section consists of activity-based learning, such as giving a mini speech or completing a group task that is driven by interpersonal communication competencies. The final section is a closing activity, in which participants may participate in freeze dance or any activity that gets them up and moving. The middle section of the lesson plan is where much of the learning occurs, and this is where participants in the programming should be permitted to slowly complete work independently throughout the course of the 10 weeks. This strategy may look like slowly allowing the participant to answer questions on their own without prompting, or presenting their speech on their own without the consultant's assistance. Not only does the organization benefit from the learning of communication skills, but Speaking Center consultants also learn to develop and facilitate lesson planning in addition to opportunities for working with diverse populations outside of the classroom.

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References

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