

Signature Employment Grant 2013: College to Careers

Introduction

While there are many programs to support K-12 students with disabilities, there are no integrated federal or state support networks to enable college students with disabilities to navigate from college to careers. The Bridging the Gap College to Careers (C2C) program fills that gap through a semester long program offering college credit to students with disabilities completing a professional development course with complimentary wrap-around services. The project builds on a pioneering course, “Professional Development and Disability” created at the University of California at Berkeley (Berkeley) and implemented at three state universities including Berkeley, San Diego State University and California State University, Fullerton. The program builds a comprehensive array of experiences around the curriculum, including peer mentoring, internships, and placement services. The program’s objective is to improve the employment outcomes of college students with disabilities by preparing them to compete and succeed in the workplace.

Launched in 2013, C2C is a partnership comprising San Diego State University’s Interwork Institute, PolicyWorks, Berkeley, San Diego State University, California State University, and Kessler Foundation. Under C2C, 157 students with a wide variety of disabilities, including physical, visual, hearing, cognitive, and psychological disabilities, completed the professional development course.

Of the 62 participants who had obtained degrees at the end of 2016, 67% obtained employment and 11% planned to enroll in graduate school. Each student was matched with a peer mentor and the project placement team identified career opportunities. Follow-up activities were provided to support a successful college to career transition. In 2016, Kessler provided an additional grant to the Florida Atlantic University Foundation to expand and replicate the program’s reach to three universities in Florida.

The nucleus of the Bridging the Gap program is the Professional Development and Disability course, which teaches the skills, workplace awareness and self-marketing ability that produces qualified and confident job candidates. This includes learning how to deal effectively with disability employment history, legal requirements, and employer policies and

practices, exploring strategies related to disclosure and workplace accommodations, and making career plans. A central element of the course is helping students overcome fear and lack of confidence related to work.

The approach focuses on understanding the perspectives of employers, developing and maintaining a professional presence and effectively navigating the competitive job market. Each student creates a career plan by working with a peer mentor. Serving as the primary interface for the program, peer mentors are current or previous college students with disabilities who help students confidently navigate their career paths. Job placement specialists then match students with job opportunities based on the career plan. In some cases, peer mentors also help students with job placement.

Project at-a-glance

Grantee Organization:

San Diego State University
Research Foundation (San Diego, CA)

Grant Amount:

\$437,888

Geographic focus:

California

Description:

A program for students with disabilities to succeed in the workplace centered around a college-credit professional development curriculum that is complemented by person-centered coaching and placement assistance.

Impact:

Significant shifts in students’ confidence, ability to develop a career path, find a job and navigate the workplace using a model that is replicable and scalable.

In addition to career planning, the program helps instill confidence and self-esteem that many students with disabilities lack, particularly with regard to work and careers. Post-program surveys of students showed dramatic improvements in confidence and optimism regarding their employment prospects. For example, after the program more than 90% of students saw disability as an asset for an employer, understood employer fears about hiring persons with disabilities and believed that an employer would want to hire them (up from 32%, 28% and 29% respectively).

Key elements of success

While the course itself played an integral role in students' success, the wrap-around supports to build career pathways, connect with employers, and access on-going peer support helped participants take their job search to the next level. In fact, students who landed jobs earned an average hourly pay of roughly \$20. Two key elements of the project make it stand out as an example to be replicated.

Ability to scale

From the outset, the program was committed to replication and duplication. In just a few years, the project has demonstrated the potential to evolve into a scalable model that is sustainable both within individual institutions and throughout state university systems. The program is highly regarded beyond the initial sites. Dozens of colleges and other organizations in the United States and abroad are now offering the course or planning to do so. Central to the ability to scale was the production of an online Toolkit containing resources for instructors, staff, and students. The Toolkit contains the project curriculum and an associated teaching guide, information on workplace skills, benefits planning and asset development, and professional presentation skills, and case studies on the influence of family support and employer perspectives.

C2C has also had requests for use of the Toolkit outside the educational system, including non-profit organizations, state agencies, private sector companies and the IRS. The private sector and IRS are using it to better understand how to work with employees with disabilities. One student explained the power of the course, "It definitely inspired a new level of confidence in me so that I am able to consider myself as not only employable, but the sort of people that a company WANTS to hire. The entire class was helpful. I find myself referring back to the worksheets and books we were given many times as I move forward in my career."

Change in attitudes

Improving students' understanding of self-presentation and self-esteem and strengthening positive attitudes, beliefs and expectations of their employment prospects is central to the program. Initial surveys showed that the majority of students had serious concerns about stigma and employer attitudes toward people with disabilities. Results from pre/post-test survey surveys reveal dramatic improvements in attitudes and perceptions about work and their ability to compete successfully in the marketplace. One Berkeley student noted, "It was transformational. I'll never be the same. I'll always be proud and confident." The program seemed to help students overcome some of their internalized ableism (internalization of discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities). A student at Fullerton shared that, "Some people might be focused on their own disability and how stigmatized they feel while golden opportunities pass them by. ***This class tackles our ideas about disability and changes how we view our own disability....*** I felt more confident about going out and networking and taking steps to get the job that I wanted - not the one that will have me."

Though not a job requirement, per se, both placement specialists and peer mentors had disabilities themselves. In particular, the use of peer mentors with disabilities fostered trust and rapport with students, which is vital when providing advice on very personal and private issues. A student at Fullerton explained the dynamic,

“Any workshop or class can benefit you by teaching you new information or skills, but what’s unique about this... is that it prepares you for entering the job market while living with a disability. That means crafting an impressive resume even if you have limited job experience, learning your rights as an American with a disability when navigating the application/interview process, how to keep your SSI or SSDI benefits when working a part- time job, how to network by promoting yourself in any situation, and above all else, taking pride in being a member of the disabled community.” Placement specialists and peer mentors could share first-hand experiences about this reality, both the challenges and successes.

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Kessler Foundation’s fundamental strategy is to link science and grantsmanship so that people with disabilities can lead more productive, independent, and fulfilling lives. Kessler Foundation Research Center conducts research that improves quality of life for persons with injuries of the spinal cord and brain, stroke, multiple sclerosis, and other chronic neurological and orthopedic conditions. Although individuals living with disabilities represent the largest minority group seeking employment in today’s marketplace, they are often not considered an integral component of corporate diversity programs. Through its strategic focus on employment, Kessler Foundation has invested more than \$41.5 million since 2004 in organizations that work to create job opportunities through development, placement employer education, and social enterprise. This funding has enabled people with disabilities to overcome the obstacles that often face them and meet the workforce needs of American business. Innovative grantmaking has introduced creative solutions to help eliminate some of the barriers that prevent people with disabilities from working.



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