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# Let Me Introduce You to a New PEER: The Postsecondary Education, Employment, and Research Project at USU

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Much like 15 additional students, James and Michael are participating in the USU post-high school program sponsored by the Logan and Cache School Districts. They are exploring prospects for post-secondary education, employment, and independent living. It is not altogether safe and secure, but as most of us can recall, life as a 19 to 20 year old is anything but sheltered and risk-free. James and Michael are developing peer relationships among their age-mates on campus. They're participating in university life and taking notes about their futures.

Below are two paraphrased interview accounts from two students attending a post-secondary high school program on campus at Utah State University (USU):

*My name is Michael. I'm 19 and I'm in Project PEER. I'm not really a college student but I'm here at USU. That's OK because I'm getting used to it. I need some time to get used to it. I'm going to work towards a GED, work towards getting a job, then I'll think about getting into college classes. It might take me a few years and I'll be out of the PEER program, but that's OK. A student should be ready to pay for his college and a job will help pay for it. I like my independence. I feel independent here. Sometimes I have a job coach or teacher with me and I feel like I don't need her right next to me. I feel like I can do most things now by myself. This program is all about doing things by yourself. This university program helps to let you learn how to do things by yourself. I mean, not like college students who take classes and they can learn things fast, like snap, snap, snap! I can't do that. But being here is good because I get confidence and after maybe two years, maybe I can take a class, too. Maybe a computer class. Because I want to work with a computer. I think I can learn pretty good computer skills and get a computer job.*

*My name is James and I am 20 years old. This is my second year in Project PEER. The first year was kind of hard because every activity I wanted to do, I couldn't get into it. But this year, it is really great because I am now just two classes away from getting my GED. Also, I had a job at the food court here on campus at USU. I work 2 ½ hours a day bussing tables. At first, I had a job coach but now I know the routine. What I like best about PEER are the teachers. And I like the friends. Some friends are in my program and some are other college students. I want to take a ballroom dance class because I'm good at dancing and I want to become a dance teacher someday. When I get my GED, I want to get an apartment and find a better job.*

Project PEER (Postsecondary Education, Employment, and Research) program is one of three post-secondary education alternatives for 18-21 year-old adults receiving special education-based services from Logan and Cache County School Districts. Located on the campus of USU at the Center for Persons with Disabilities, PEER staff conduct programs focusing on employment training and job placement, educational preparation for adult roles and responsibilities, and social integration with the campus community. Project Staff are committed to age-appropriate inclusion, employment and career planning for young adults, and high-quality research leading to establishment of a model post-secondary campus-based program.

Project PEER is a collaborative effort of the two school districts, and Utah State University's Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation, the Center for Persons with Disabilities and the Disability Resource Center. The program is staffed by district personnel. The Center for Persons with Disabilities provides a classroom to use as a home base. The Disability Resource Center offers support for students.

The environment in this USU campus-based program is open. The classroom at the Center for Persons with Disabilities is often empty because students are actively involved in educational and employment training activities around campus and in the community. Students are engaged in campus-based learning activities most of the day. Although the project serves young adults with intellectual disabilities, students are selected on the basis of career and employment potential and relative independence.

A major goal of the PEER program is to prepare students for successful employment in the community. To that end, students are placed in job training sites where they receive coaching for successful employment. Students engage in systematic training to improve their employment skills and their community living skills.

# Let Me Introduce You to a New PEER:

## The Postsecondary Education, Employment, and Research Project at USU

This training is provided by a variety of people including professionals, paraprofessionals, and volunteers who may be university students and others.

Project PEER is not the first or only campus-based postsecondary program in Utah. For example, Murray District maintains a program with Salt Lake Community College (see April 2004 Utah Special Educator). Nationally, over 100 university-based post-secondary programs exist for young adults with intellectual disabilities. A website ([www.thinkcollege.net](http://www.thinkcollege.net)) describes the benefits of a college education, resources, and information for students, families, and professionals. Grigal and Hart (2009) describe postsecondary options for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Postsecondary programs range from those emphasizing employment training located on campuses to those more fully integrated within the mainstream of a university. The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 addresses provision of high quality

Assistive Technology Lab. All employment-training sites are based on an initial assessment of preferences and degree of match between preferred jobs and current skill levels. Other sites include an elementary school, preschool, offices, food service, hotel house-keeping, an assisted living center, health and fitness center, and the Cache Humane Society. University and community employers report very positive evaluations of Project PEER trainees. Four students have been hired into part-time jobs on the basis of their experience in employment training.

Project PEER works to establish itself as a contributing partner at USU. A mentoring program assists PEER students in building academic and life skills by developing partnerships with USU mentors. Mentor volunteers provide support to individual students in academic skills, adjustment to college life, career exploration, and advocacy. They work with individual PEER students on targeted skill-building or campus awareness activities. Project PEER is always on the go. It is not a place; it is a fast-moving process. Students and their mentors or job coaches are busy working towards targeted goals. Keeping up with James and Michael is a challenging task, but no one is suggesting to slow them down. ■

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support services, including federal work-study and Pell grants, in an effort to promote full participation of individuals with intellectual disabilities as university students.

For James and Michael, a day at Project PEER is a whirlwind of activity. Individual transition plan objectives may address learning to ride local public transportation, perusing want ads for jobs, writing job applications, practicing interview skills, planning menus, cooking lunch, budgeting, reading the local or campus newspaper, or preparing for the GED. Job sites for learning employment skills are varied and include everything from researching artifacts in an Anthropology Museum to designing and building assistive devices for individuals with disabilities at the Utah

