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PEERs on Campus: What Works After 18



For eight students in the Logan and Cache Districts' Post High School program, January 2007 brought a change in the calendar *and* a change in place. They relocated to the campus of Utah State University (USU) to begin the PEER project—Postsecondary Education, Employment, and Research. A collaborative endeavor between the two districts, the Center for Persons with Disabilities, and the Department of Special Education & Rehabilitation, PEER is expanding the social and employment horizons for post high students. It places students in an inclusive setting along with their agemates who are enrolled in academic programs at USU. At the same time, the project provides a site for practicum and student teacher placements for future educators. It is also a research site to study ways to teach employment, social, recreation, and leisure skills to young adults. Students' programs continue to be based on their IEPs and are supported by teachers and paraeducators who are employed by the districts.

An immediate impact of the move to the USU campus was an expansion of the community job opportunities for these students. They now include six campus sites such as the USU library, bookstore, and facilities and maintenance, with more to come. Bob Morgan, a USU special education faculty member and Erin Horrocks, a doctoral student, surveyed employers at the end of the school year. Ms. Horrocks reported, "Project PEER students are making positive impressions on Utah State University employers in regards to their job training. Although there is still some fine-tuning yet to do, initial impressions of the program are favorable." In addition, eight employment supervisors rated the students' job performance as improved after they participated in job coaching. They rated their overall satisfaction with students' performance, social skills, and ability to follow directions at 3.4 on a four point scale.

When employers were asked if they would be willing to supervise employees with disabilities in the future, all answered yes. One said, "It gives them [the students] a chance to learn a new skill. They also bring a new outlook on life. The individual was an awesome employee and we hope he comes back in the fall."

A testimony to its success, by fall of 2007 PEER had grown in size from 8 to 20 students and from one (Stephanie Wilkinson) to two teachers—Kerry Done and Chris Bartlett. Their "home" classroom at the Center for Persons with Disabilities houses academic skill building—but the real action continues to be on campus. Referring to the more than 115 hours of supervised work time that PEER students donated in a little over three months while learning job skills, Kerry told a reporter from *The Utah Statesman* (the USU campus newspaper, Friday, November 16, 2007, pp. 1,14), "It's a positive thing for them [the students] to feel like they're contributing to society...The bar has been raised and we expect a lot more from the students."

The employment supervisors identified one challenge that is common to collaborative programs—communication—in this case, between the

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Celebrate!



job coach, teacher, and graduate student employment liaisons. This is necessary to resolve problems and to plan activities. Although sometimes a challenge, it is not insurmountable because the teachers spearhead communications. The value of cell phones is obvious as they manage to be almost everywhere at once while students and staff engage in activities campus-wide.

Collaboration led to the development of the PEER program and contributes to its operation. In addition to the teachers, the PEER leadership team includes special education directors David Forbush and Kirk Allen; supervisors and student support services members John Cardis, Angie Loosli, and Jim Payant; two USU faculty members; a graduate student and two CPD directors. In communicating with colleagues, these team members have expanded the program's influence and, most important, generated discussions about how to prepare students for the transition from school to adult life.

Teacher Chris Bartlett reported, "I attended a meeting with 10 special education teachers in Cache District grades 6-12 and John Cardis. Both a high school and a 8-9 grade teacher asked if the students they were sending into post-high had the skills that prepared them for post-high

experience. They wanted to know what employers looked for and if they could start in the lower grades to help better prepare the students. One teacher reported that she works with Special Olympics and students have told her, 'I go to USU,' 'I'm going to go to USU,' or 'I can't wait to go to USU.' Parents are also asking PEER teachers about the program and how to get in. We can give so much support and guidance to these students 18-21."

PEER is not the first or only campus-based postsecondary program in Utah. Danelle Keith described the Murray District's collaborative effort with Salt Lake Community College in the April, 2004 *Utah Special Educator*. These programs join more than 100 across the nation that the Institute on Community Inclusion has identified as opportunities for students with cognitive and intellectual disabilities to participate in postsecondary education (www.thinkcollege.net). These programs represent various models ranging from "substantially separate" life skills and employment training to academic programs within the mainstream of a university setting. All, however, give meaning to inclusion in postsecondary education for 18-21 year old young adults. For more information, contact bob.morgan@usu.edu. ■