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ABSTRACT

The Frost Center (Rockville, Maryland) is a private, nonprofit school and therapeutic day program that serves adolescents with emotional, learning, and behavioral disabilities and their families. Approximately two-thirds of each student's day is spent in academic classes, acquiring the skills and behavior necessary for a return to a less restrictive environment. The other portion of the student's day is spent in counseling, mostly in a therapy group setting. One evening each week, students, their parents, and their siblings participate in a family and parent counseling session aimed at changing destructive and ineffectual patterns of family interaction and parenting. One component of Frost Center's programming is the Work Day, designed to help students obtain employment and independent living skills, identify strengths and weaknesses as a worker, become aware of realistic career options, and build actual work experience. Students begin by working at the school 1 day per week doing landscaping tasks, building maintenance, and office work for which they are paid an hourly wage. Students who consistently receive positive work evaluations are recommended for internships, in which students perform volunteer or paid work at other sites, such as retail shops, pet stores, libraries, and service stations. Frost Center students also take a career education course, to help them learn about the world of work and independent adult living. (JDD)

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Transition Components of the Frost Center, A Model Program

Background: The Frost Center and its Students

The Frost Center, a private, non-profit organization established in 1976, is a school and therapeutic day program that serves adolescents with emotional, learning and behavioral disabilities and their families. The school serves students from ages 10 to 21 who need a supportive structured environment combining academic instruction, daily therapy, and weekly family meetings. Students are placed at Frost by their public school districts when the school district determines that it does not have the most appropriate placement to meet the student's needs.

Approximately two-thirds of each student's day is spent in academic classes, acquiring the skills and behavior necessary for a return to a less restrictive environment - the student's home school if possible. At Frost, school is regarded as the "work" of adolescence. Courses are designed to give the student the same level of instruction and the same academic credits towards graduation that he or she would be receiving if attending his or her local public high school. Classes are small and emphasize individual attention to accommodate students with learning disabilities and behavior disabilities.

The other portion of the student's day is spent in counseling, working through the difficulties that have prevented the student from succeeding in the regular education environment. Most of this is done in a therapy group setting. The staff facilitates the collective effort of the adolescent peer group in supporting and challenging each other to make the changes necessary for success in school, at home, at work, and in the community. In addition, one evening each week students, their parents, and their siblings participate in a family and parent counseling session which is aimed at changing destructive and ineffectual patterns of family interaction and parenting.

The Frost Center staff is made up of state certified special education teachers, social workers, clinical and school psychologists, and a consulting psychiatrist.

The Work Day

The Work Day component of The Frost Center is designed to help students obtain employability and independent living skills, identify strengths and weaknesses as a worker, become aware of realistic career options, and build actual work experience. Students begin by working at the school, one day per week (every Thursday) doing landscaping tasks, building maintenance, and office

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work for which they are paid an hourly wage. They are evaluated at the end of the work day in a group session with staff and peers in which the students exchange feedback with each other on their abilities to work efficiently, cooperate with coworkers, carry out their supervisors' instructions, show initiative, obey safety rules, and other work-related issues.

### Work Day Structure

The staff work day manager divides the students into work crews and assigns a student supervisor for each crew. Student supervisors must earn their positions by having demonstrated responsibility, leadership, dependability and competence in performing the tasks at hand. The staff manager gives instructions to the student supervisors and holds the student supervisor accountable for getting the tasks done as instructed and in the time allotted. If the staff manager sees students performing tasks incorrectly, breaking safety rules, behaving poorly, etc., the staff manager notifies the student supervisor. We expect the supervisor to correct the problem. We permit the supervisors to give consequences such as hours after school or laps around the blacktop, but most supervisors try to talk with the offender first and are generally successful in influencing their peers to turn their behavior around. If problems continue, the supervisor is expected to "call a group" which means that the work day stops temporarily and all students and staff meet to discuss the problem and help the student who is having difficulty. Students are motivated to persuade their peers to cooperate because they do not get paid for time not spent working.

### Types of Work

The primary type of work students do for the school is landscaping and grounds keeping. Students mow the grounds in the spring and summer and rake leaves in the fall. The Frost Center has several flower and vegetable gardens which students plant, maintain and harvest as the seasons dictate. Students trim and prune the many trees and shrubs on the school grounds. Students also work at maintaining our extensive collection of aquariums, and our zoo in which reside numerous birds, reptiles and rodents. There are two or three students at any given time whom we appoint to become experts at this, based on their interest and proclivity for this kind of work. Students also do office work for the school such as typing, filing, photocopying and mailings.

Occasionally, the Frost school will get offers to do jobs off site. These jobs are arranged, coordinated and supervised by staff members. Staff members also work out payment agreements with those contracting for our student's services and transport students to and from job sites. Off site jobs include office cleaning and moving. When working off site, students get a chance to prove themselves in the "real" (non-special ed.) world. Off site work usually brings out the best in them.

## Payment

When a student first enters the program, he or she begins working on a probationary basis at no pay. After a trial period of three work days, the student may ask to be on pay level 1 (\$1.50/hour). There are 6 pay levels: 1 through 5 and Supervisor level. To receive a pay level increase the student must get the approval of his or her student supervisor and a staff manager. When the student has obtained this approval, the student may ask for a pay level increase, during the evaluation meeting held at the end of the day. Students and staff members comment on whether or not they feel the student deserves the raise based on their observations of the student over the past several work days. The student then takes a vote. A show of hands tells us if the majority agree with the pay raise and, if so, it is granted. Generally, a student has gone through all 5 pay levels before he or she is chosen to be a supervisor by the staff work day managers. Students fill out a pay sheet at the end of the work day and must show the hours they worked minus time out for breaks, lunch, groups, etc. The student must have the pay sheet signed by the student supervisor and a staff manager who are aware of the student's time on and off the job.

## The Evaluation Group

The group meeting at the end of the day is essential to the learning process of the work day. The group is facilitated by a staff manager. All students and staff are present. The facilitator asks each student supervisor in turn to describe his or her crew's tasks, and how each worker performed. The facilitator then asks the members of the supervisor's crew if they have any feedback for each other or their supervisor. The students give praise, criticism, suggestions and support to each other during this time. They often comment on changes in each other's work habits, skills and attitudes, and inquire about the reasons for such changes. The group facilitator carefully manages the direction of these sessions to assure that a learning process takes place. It is important that students do not get more than they can handle. We help students to be both sensitive and honest as they confront each others' deeper emotional issues and consider how these affect job performance. Students receive a grade and credit for work day as if it were a class. Most school districts count this as an elective. The grade is based on the student's acquisition of defined employability skills many of which are written on the student I.E.P./I.T.P.

## Benefits of the Work Day Program

Students do not have to be academically strong to be good, employable workers. Yet, our demands and expectations of students on work day, although different, are just as high as they are in classes. In fact, we have found that good grades and high educational achievement test scores are not a good predictor of how good a worker a student will be on work day. Especially for students who are not scholastically oriented, but show the ability

to meet employers expectations, work day fosters a very real sense of self worth. Many students offer to come to Frost on Saturdays and work for pay. The work day permits staff to identify the students' employability strengths and weaknesses and to address them directly within the work day format. By doing real work for pay and hearing how co-workers and supervisors evaluate them, the students gain employability that transfers to jobs they may get in their communities. In addition, the work experience at school helps to increase their confidence in pursuing employment outside of school. As we know, the more work experience a student gets while in high school, the more likely he or she is to get and keep employment after graduation.

### Internships

When a student has received consistently positive evaluations and shown a high level of responsibility and accomplishment on work days, he or she is recommended for an internship. To qualify for an internship the student must regularly demonstrate socially approved behavior in relationships with peers and adults, and the ability to cope with internal and external pressures appropriately. If staff members feel that the student cannot handle an internship student is not placed until he or she meets the necessary criteria.

#### Types of Internships

Internship placements are selected based on the students' interests. This helps the students learn some of the pros and cons of their "ideal" jobs and the realities of the world of work. It also helps them plan for their futures; the individuals they meet - bosses, managers, supervisors, and coworkers - often serve as role models and give information about career fields and ways to get started in them. Frost Center students have had internships at a variety of places including pet stores, service stations, nurseries, special ed. placements for elementary age children, retail shops, public libraries, small engine repair shops, lawyer's offices, public agencies such as the Dept. of Social Services, apartment management offices, and photography studios. The staff internship coordinator arranges internships by calling places of business in the community.

#### Scheduling and Transportation

Interns go to their placements every Thursday for four or five hours during the school day. Other arrangements can be made regarding hours if necessary. Transportation is provided by the student or the school staff. The internship may last for one or two semesters depending on the employers' needs and circumstances. The student may volunteer or be paid, but in either case should meet the expectations of the employer just as any employee would.

#### What We Expect from Employers and What Employers Can Expect From Us

Though payment of the intern by the employer is not required it is

encouraged if possible. Receiving a regular pay check gives the student a more positive view of working, a taste of independence, and a sense of self-worth. Because most employers do not need an employee only once a week we understand that it may not be possible to pay the intern and just appreciate the opportunity the employer gives the student to gain valuable work experience.

In most cases, the employer's Worker's Compensation Insurance will cover the intern even if the intern is not officially on the payroll. We recommend that employers check with their insurance companies to make sure this is the case before taking an intern. We do not expect employers to accept liability for anything other than what their Worker's Compensation Insurance already covers, and are willing to sign a statement to that effect.

#### Employer Contact and Evaluation

The Frost Center Internship Coordinator stays in touch with the employer by phoning or stopping by to discuss the student's progress. We expect the employer to talk with the coordinator as well as the student about how he or she sees the student as an employee. Is the student a "good" employee? Could the student make it in this job if he or she were employed full time? Why or why not? In what aspects of the job is the student particularly successful? What improvements should the student consider making? These are the types of questions we want employers to answer. It is important to emphasize that we do not expect an employer to keep an intern who is not working out for what ever reason. At the end of the school marking period the coordinator asks the employer to fill out an evaluation questionnaire. The student receives a grade and high school credit for the internship.

#### Benefits of the Internship Program

Internships are usually very rewarding for the employers, the students, and everyone else involved. Employers get a worker who is interested in the job for reasons other than making money, who is eager to learn, and who is there because he or she earned the privilege of being there. It also gives the employer the satisfaction of helping a young person who has more than the usual amount of challenges and obstacles in the already difficult process of becoming an adult.

The students get a chance to learn job skills and to put to practical use the coping skills they have developed at Frost which benefits themselves as well as the community. This builds self confidence and increases the likelihood that the student will choose a lifestyle that contributes to society rather than burdens it. The students also get insight into the adult world and a stimulus to start thinking about how they want to make their living. They become aware of the vast number of choices to be made and begin to realize that the better informed they are, the better able they will be to make choices that will lead to satisfying adult lives.

The student internship gives The Frost Center staff another "yard stick" with which to measure the student's progress toward being able to function productively and appropriately in the "real world". By seeing how the student performs in a work environment without the protection of family or a special school, we can more accurately assess the student's needs and increase the effectiveness of the student's educational and treatment plan. The small act of one employer taking on a student intern for a few hours a week has a huge, positive impact on many people.

### Career Education

The Career Education course helps students learn about the world of work and independent adult living. There is no set curriculum. The course is different each semester and is designed according to the needs of the particular students taking the course. The teaching team reviews the students' charts and I.E.P./I.T.P.'s, and consults with the students before the course begins. The class meets for a two hour time block. Course content generally includes vocational interest assessment and self surveys, career exploration, job seeking, job interviewing, personal financial management, consumer economics, health and nutrition, travel training, computer applications and more. Activities include field trips, guest speakers, library research, group projects, discussions and hands-on work-related exercises. At times, the teachers do not have the knowledge or experience to directly teach the information the students are interested in. When this is the case, the teachers facilitate the learning process by bringing in guest teachers or taking students out to meet people who have volunteered to teach them what they want to know. Students enjoy the course because of its relevance and hands-on nature, and because they have had input into the curriculum.