

How a Library Can Develop the Ability in Disability

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Abstract

Staff members at E. H. Butler Library, Buffalo State College, have collaborated with the College-Based Transition Program to help students with disabilities achieve a more rounded, fulfilling college experience. The CBTP program is a partnership between the Buffalo Public Schools, People Inc., Parents for Public Schools, and Buffalo State College. It allows young people ages 18 – 23 who have completed high school and have a wide range of developmental disabilities to participate in an inclusive, age-appropriate learning environment, acquiring job skills as well as social skills that will prepare them for the workplace.

Butler Library staff members mentor many of these students with internship opportunities in different departments, offering training in specific tasks, experience in job readiness, exposure to office protocol, and an introduction to workplace conduct and attire. Student interns work in many departments, circulation, stacks and Interlibrary Loan.

The transitions program at Buffalo State reaches beyond the scope of race, religion, and gender to include individuals with a vast array of disabilities. Not only do the transitions students benefit from their experiences, our own college students learn to overcome their stereotypes about people with disabilities and find they not only can work with them, they can help them as well. The college environment is a great place for all young adults to realize their place in the world, and the faces of diversity at Butler Library help make the experience richer.

How a Library Can Develop the Ability in Disability

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Staff members at E. H. Butler Library, Buffalo State College, have collaborated with two distinct programs to help make inclusivity and diversity more than just buzzwords; here on this campus they are part everyday normal life.

The first program is the College-Based Transition Program (CBTP) which helps students with disabilities achieve a more rounded, fulfilling college experience. The CBTP is a partnership between the Buffalo Public Schools, People Inc., Parents for Public Schools, and Buffalo State College. It allows young people ages 18 – 23 who have completed high school and have a wide range of developmental disabilities to participate in an inclusive, age-appropriate learning environment, acquiring job skills as well as social skills that will prepare them for the workplace.

In 2001 the program was launched at Buffalo State College. It was one of the first of its kind and there were not many examples in which to follow. The first task at hand was to find professors who would be willing to allow these non-traditional students to attend their classes. Ramona Santa Maria, Assistant Professor for the Computer Information Systems Department, was one of the first approached: “I began working with CBTP since its first year. It has changed me significantly. I used to be uncomfortable about how to act around someone with a disability; I

didn't think that this was my "gift". However, after the first year working with CBTP, and after they set up the teaching assistant program, I became more comfortable in the classroom and realized that I need to treat them like any other student in the class". Professor Santa Maria was one of only four professors that were willing to work with this group the first year.

Once the educational aspect was up and going the second part was to find internships for these participating students. They were to be part of the college experience in every way a mainstream student would be. This however proved to be one of the more difficult components. One off-campus place was willing to let the student's intern at their facility; it seemed for this group that there was no place on campus for them to get the working environment they so desperately needed. Mary Lou Vaughan, special education teacher from the Buffalo Public School component, approached me and asked if I had any jobs in the library her students could do. I replied, "Absolutely". She further went on to explain that these were students with significant disabilities that would work with aides and do whatever jobs were within their capabilities, with no disruption to library service as a whole.

Students were then brought in and interviewed to see where their qualifications matched daily library duties, and there were many options. E.H. Butler Library is a very busy academic library in an urban setting. Located in the museum district of Buffalo, New York, the library is always bustling with activity. Tasks that were immediately visible included daily maintenance of the stack areas, which involved picking up all the materials that were left on tables and in study carrels, general cleaning, and rough sorting of library materials. The tasks that grew from this opportunity continued to expand and character traits once thought to be symptoms of a disability now turned out to be job skills. Autism, a disorder that expounds repetitive behavior, can find an ally in shelving books, shelf reading and filing. Students that were once lacking social skills now

work at the circulation desk helping check materials in and out. Jobs that other students do not find enjoyable are happily tackled by some of the special needs students. Not only do they do the job well, they do it in many cases better than even some trained staff members.

In this exchange of forces, we as clerks of an understaffed library get much needed assistance from students that come to work eagerly, timely, and enthusiastic. The students in return learn the social interaction and communication skills that they may be lacking. Each student is given a uniform, a time sheet, and instructions on professional protocol. If they are not coming in, or are late, they are taught how to call into a place of employment. They are also taught how to use a time clock, appropriate dress, for the job and appropriate behavior. Through this training many have gone on to get jobs in the “real world.” Armed with skills, experience and letters of recommendation they are as viable as anyone else in the employment market. One girl in particular is now a file clerk at a busy downtown legal office, not as an intern but as a paid employee and hers is one of the many success stories that have come about from this collaborative union.

Buffalo State College wins as well as the CBTP has teamed up with various education departments to offer viable situations for these students to work with instead of case studies. Here the exceptional education department can actually work with differently-abled students and see the varying degrees of need there is in a class room and how to work within those parameters. On the job training beats a case study anytime!

The program grows exponentially each year, with more and more success stories coming from this group. There are now over 70 professors who admit CBTP students into their classes. Each student needs 72 continuing education units (CEU's) to complete the program, most graduate

with over 100. In many instances the CBTP students are taking the class with the rest of the student body; sometimes modifications must be made, but in many cases not. Courses in math and history are being taken at the 300 level and being passed with high academic standards.

The second program is through the Buffalo Public School system, the Work Transition Program. Claudia Kania has been with the program for over ten years. This program brings students 18- 21 years old who are multiply disabled to the library for work internships as well. Through these internships students are learning to be more independent. They are learning social skills, responsibility, dependability and cooperation, preparing them to be a contributing member of society. This program also enables them to experience a comfort level amongst their peers and campus awareness. The students in this program could very well migrate over to the CBTP and continue on in a more academic role.

The transition program reaches beyond the scope of race, religion, and gender to include individuals with a vast array of disabilities. Not only do the Transition students benefit from their experiences, mainstream college students learn to overcome their stereotypes about people with disabilities and realize that everyone is differently-abled, not disabled. The library offers many opportunities for diverse students with disabilities to become viable members of the work team and to be placed in highly visible areas where the interaction with mainstream students becomes second nature. This gives everyone an opportunity to learn and grow in an adult environment. As the employer, the library is able to offer unpaid internship positions, while the interns receive on-the-job training and the chance to network and connect with their peers. At E.H. Butler Library, staff members mentor many of these students with internship opportunities in different departments, offering training in specific tasks, experience in job readiness, exposure

to office protocol, and an introduction to workplace conduct and attire. Student interns work in many departments, such as circulation, stacks and Interlibrary Loan.

The college environment is a great place for all young adults to realize their place in the world, and the faces of diversity at Butler Library help make the experience richer.

Ramona Santa Maria -Assistant Professor Computer Information Systems Department

Mar Lou Vaughan -Buffalo Public Schools Special Education Teacher (CBTP)

Claudia Kania- Buffalo Public Schools Special Education Teacher

Susan Jaworski-Interlibrary loan clerk, winner of the 2004 Pathfinders award and 2008

Certificate of appreciation from the College Based Transition program