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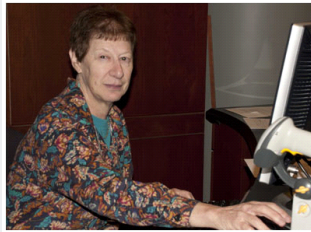
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Features

Championing Project SEARCH: The Role of the Library



By Pamela Bluh, Thurgood Marshall Law Library, University of Maryland

The Project SEARCH High School Transition Program gives students the opportunity to gain valuable job skills that will assist them in transitions to the work world.¹

In many libraries, large and small, technical services staff are responsible for an assortment of jobs ranging from routine and repetitive to complex and highly specialized. And, as the mantra goes, we are often asked to do more with less! So when an opportunity arose to become a Project SEARCH internship site on the Baltimore City campus of the University of Maryland, the reaction in technical services at the Thurgood Marshall Law Library was

immediate and positive.² Although altruism did enter into our decision—altruism is, after all, one of the core values of librarianship—and participating in a public service program appealed to our sense of community service, at the same time, we were well aware that participation in the program could also offer some practical benefits.

Project SEARCH is dedicated to providing education and training to young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities through an innovative workforce and career development model that benefits the individual, workplace, and community.³

With the support of the library's administration, our first assignment as a Project SEARCH internship site was to determine which tasks would be most suitable for the student interns. Since we did not know what limitations the students might have, we thought that tasks performed on a daily basis and that required only a modest learning curve and could be accomplished with a minimum of direct supervision would be ideal for the students. After meeting with the job coaches and other members of the Project SEARCH team on campus, we suggested several activities that met those criteria, including delivering newspapers and magazines to the reading room and other offices in the law school, opening and sorting the mail, and stamping and sensitizing library materials. Once we were all in agreement about the tasks and about the time commitment required from the technical services staff, we trained the job coaches, advised them on best practices, and helped them establish basic guidelines to which the interns could refer in the performance of their duties.

At the beginning of the 2008–2009 school year we welcomed our first Project SEARCH intern. By the end of September, only a few weeks into the school year, we had an epiphany! Not only was he capable of handling the tasks we had originally designated, and he accomplished those tasks accurately and efficiently, but he made it clear that he was very eager, and capable, of taking on additional tasks. This proved to be a valuable lesson for us as we were immediately required to set aside any preconceived notions we may have had about the skills and abilities of the student interns. Over the years, they have surprised us in some amazing ways!

Project SEARCH challenges traditional perceptions about employing people with learning disabilities, proving that with good instruction ... they can perform jobs as well as non-disabled persons.⁴

Several of the interns have excellent keyboarding skills—it must be the gaming and texting—and excel at typing call number labels for new books. Others are wizards with numbers and like to proofread the call number labels and match them to the books. Some prefer working with letters rather than numbers and happily alphabetize journal issues and shelve them in the periodical stacks. A few prefer to work individually whereas others enjoy working with a partner or as a member of a small team. Because the technical services environment is flexible, we are able to create an individual work plan to take advantage of each student's special abilities and gifts.



At the beginning of the school year, the campus Project SEARCH coordinator and her staff arrange tours of the various internship sites for the prospective students and their families. The students have a chance to meet the staff at each worksite and participate in the decision about which sites interest them the most and where the work seems best suited to their talents. Since becoming a Project SEARCH internship site, Technical Services at the Thurgood Marshall Law Library has hosted ten students, three per school year, each for approximately ten weeks, corresponding roughly to one school term.⁵ After interviewing the prospective interns—as we would with all job applicants—the students are assigned to specific work sites and trained by the job coaches on the basic tasks. During the introductory period, while they are being trained and their job skills are being evaluated, the students tend to be a bit shy and nervous. However, it often does not take long before they start to project self-confidence and begin to advocate for themselves. Then they are ready to tackle more complicated, challenging tasks. When they leave us, after ten weeks, they have acquired important skills that will stand them in good stead when they enter the job market.

PHOTO: Thurgood Marshall Law Library, Library Technician II Nick Clulow (in the checkered shirt) and Project Search Intern Franklin Akins.

At the end of the academic year, the commencement ceremony, complete with Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*, is a joyous occasion for the students and their families as well as for the staff. Students proudly share personal stories about their participation in Project SEARCH and describe how the experience has prepared them for the future.⁶ They speak about the respect they have for their co-workers, that they learned how to stay focused and that they gained self-confidence and acquired real-world job

skills.

Project SEARCH was the brainchild of Erin Riehle and Cincinnati Children's Hospital.⁷ In the mid 1990s the hospital was implementing a major initiative to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities, and at the same time addressing a problem of high turnover among entry-level staff with responsibility for basic tasks. The convergence of these two factors led to the creation of the program that became the model for Project SEARCH.

Initially conceived for a hospital setting, Project SEARCH sites are now found not only in hospitals and other health-related enterprises, but also in banks, in state and local government offices, and in academia. Over the last decade and a half than more two hundred Project SEARCH programs have been started in forty-two states and four countries.⁸ The Project SEARCH concept consists of two parts. One consists of a high school transition program where students receive instruction in the skills and techniques they will need in the workplace, as well as gaining real-world experience in the workplace through practical internships. The second part is an adult employment program that creates an individualized job placement for each participant by capitalizing on the job skills acquired during the internship phase.

Project SEARCH is unique in its total immersion of students in the workplace. [S]tudents spend the entire school day at the workplace, beginning with a one-hour classroom session that teaches employment and independent living skills such as effective communication, goal setting, decision making, problem solving, nutrition, grooming, and independent travel. ... Project SEARCH staff identify internships that simulate real-world employment and teach competitive, marketable, transferable skills.⁹

The beauty of Project SEARCH is that it benefits the students as well as the employer. Students learn to manage their time. They are taught how to dress appropriately for the workplace and how to navigate the city's transit system. They learn to follow instructions and experience working collegially with co-workers and supervisors. These are all practical skills they need in order to compete successfully in the workplace.¹⁰

Hosting Project SEARCH provides a unique opportunity for the employer as well. Working with the job coaches helps the staff learn the most effective ways to support and guide students with special needs. They acquire techniques to break tasks down into manageable segments, seek alternative explanations, and create accommodations to address individual requirements. Perhaps most significantly, they become role models for the students, which results in subtle and positive changes in their own performance.

Serving as a Project SEARCH internship site is an exceptional experience for all the parties involved and one where the advantages exceed the disadvantages. Without a doubt, participation requires effort and time on the part of the staff. However, we need only to witness the transformation the students undergo during the internship period to be completely convinced that it is effort and time well spent.¹¹

Reference Notes

1. Project SEARCH University of Maryland Newsletter, 1, no. 1 (October 2011).
<http://www.dors.state.md.us/NR/rdonlyres/7BF16D5C-4532-4B49-8743-9A163BE5B050/0/NDEANewsletter.pdf> (accessed November 4, 2011).
2. The University of Maryland in Baltimore together with The Arc Baltimore, the Baltimore City Public Schools, and the Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services established a Project SEARCH program on the Baltimore city campus in 2008. The other Project SEARCH internship locations on the UMB campus include the Health Services & Human Services Library, Parking and Transportation Services, Housekeeping, Campus Mail, Human Resource Services, Paint Shop, Center for School Mental Health, Work Control, URecFit, and A & F Facilities Management Business Administration. The University of Maryland Medical Center joined the program in 2010 and accepted interns in Linen Services, the Receiving Dock, Patient Transportation, Biomedical Equipment Distribution, Cafeteria, Mailroom, Inflammatory Bowel Disease Program, Guest/Volunteer Services, and Subway.
3. Project SEARCH. <http://www.projectsearch.us/> (accessed October 23, 2011).
4. Royal United Hospital, Bath, UK, "Project SEARCH," *Insight*, no. 8 (winter 2010): 10.
http://www.ruh.nhs.uk/about/documents/insight/winter_2010.pdf (accessed September 28, 2011).
5. During the summer of 2011 we were also fortunate to work with one student intern.
6. The Arc Baltimore, "Project SEARCH Student Reflections." <http://thearcbaltimore.org/pdfs/PS%20Student%20graduate%20Reflections.pdf> (accessed November 3, 2011).
7. Erin Riehle is a founder and Senior Director of Project SEARCH. "[She] began her career at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center as a staff nurse in the pediatric intensive care unit and rapidly advanced to clinical director of the emergency department. Her interest in employment for people with disabilities grew from her frustration with high turnover rates among workers performing critical tasks such as re-stocking emergency room supply shelves. Riehle found that placing individuals with developmental disabilities in these positions was both an effective solution to her staffing problems and an improvement in quality of life for the workers she employed. This positive experience ultimately led to a systematic, hospital-wide effort, led by Riehle, to explore job possibilities for people with disabilities." http://www.projectsearch.us/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=73&Itemid=56 (accessed October 20, 2011).
8. Project Search, "Our Story. Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center." www.projectsearch.us/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=46&Itemid (accessed October 23, 2011).
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<http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/edicollect/1279/> (accessed October 17, 2011).
10. "How Has Your Supervisor Invested in You?" 2. <http://www.dors.state.md.us/NR/rdonlyres/7BF16D5C-4532-4B49-8743-9A163BE5B050/0/NDEANewsletter.pdf> (accessed November 4, 2011).
11. For more information about Project SEARCH write to Project SEARCH Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, 3333 Burnet Avenue, MLC5030, Cincinnati, OH 450229. http://www.projectsearch.us/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=66&Itemid=77 (accessed October 23, 2011).