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Communication

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# Transition Bulletin - Spring Issue

## DNR, EDUCATION AGENCIES AND MRS CREATE SUMMER JOBS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES— YEAR 8

Since 2008, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR), education agencies and Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS) have been partnering to create opportunities for student with disabilities in secondary education to participate in summer jobs in the state parks.

The first DNR site in Traverse City was the result of a cooperative effort between Traverse Bay Area Intermediate School District (TBAISD), Traverse City State Park and MRS to grow opportunities for work-based learning experiences.

Each year the project has added new school districts, DNR sites and MRS offices. Bill Colombo has championed this effort from a small pilot site to a robust statewide program. Presently, 40 state parks or recreation areas, 25 school districts and 10 MRS district offices are involved in the program. Last year alone, 162 students with disabilities participated in the program.

The state parks or recreation areas include: Porcupine Mountains, McLain, Baraga, Van Ripper, Tahquamenon Falls, Brimley, Straits, Cheboygan, Wilderness, Petoskey, Young, Leelanau, Traverse City, Interlochen, Orchard Beach, Mitchell, Hartwick Pines, North Higgins, South Higgins, Wilson, Ludington, Mears, Silver Lake, Muskegon, Hoffmaster, Grand Haven, Holland, Van Buren, Warren Dunes, Fort Custer, Yankee Springs, Ionia, Sleepy Hollow, Island Lake, Pinckney, Pontiac Lake, Dodge Park #4, Milliken SP/Globe, Sleeper and Port Crescent.

The program is an eight-week work experience from mid-June to mid-August. Students make minimum wage and the hours per week vary



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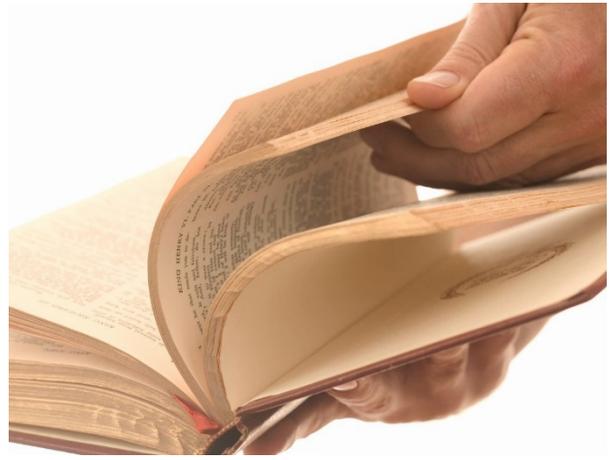
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by site. This is especially important because, students with disabilities who participate in paid work experiences dramatically increase their competitive integrated employment outcomes after they exit secondary education.

Last year's program evaluation revealed a lot of positives about the program. The following are a sampling of comments from educators, MRS staff and DNR staff:



- “It was great to see the growth of student skills. This is especially true of soft skills and growth in confidence that the students obtain from their involvement.”
- “I thought it really provided a great service and helped build a work ethic with the kids. I enjoyed the experience very much.”
- “Youth were provided a very valuable hands on experience and skills that will make them more marketable to employers.”
- “Student gains were tremendous. Employers were generally pleased with the staff we referred”
- “This was an excellent work experience for the students that was only made possible by the cooperation between the participating agencies. Mr. Colombo's organization of what needed to be done for the program was exceptional”
- “One student worked so well that the DNR wants to hire him next year.”
- “Students were able to gain basic work experience, and staff was able to evaluate student's soft skills and work readiness. This has built a positive relationship with the DNR and an exposure to that career pathway.”
- “Having the students interact socially with the DNR workers was a positive experience”
- “There was impressive growth from start of program to end, and students learned to establish a working relationship with employers.”
- “This was an amazing opportunity for paid work experiences for students where they can learn new skills and explore different careers.”
- “The Projects that were completed at the parks would not have been done without the help of this program”



- “The relationship with DNR workers at the park was very positive and they were willing to help the students with whatever needed. They were compassionate and indicated they would like the program back next year!”
- “The students loved the experience and really bonded with the job coach. They were excited about work and understand what work is. Our kids even volunteered for some after-work activities with the kid's program at the park.”
- “It was a great self-esteem builder and an excellent learning experience for the students who participated.”

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*“These students really want to work, and they are capable of working.”*

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## INTERN PROGRAM HELPS LENAWEE COUNTY STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES GAIN SKILLS

By Dan Cherry

Daily Telegram Staff Writer

Thanks to the collaboration by Lenawee County agencies and organizations, people with disabilities are using internships to help gain competitive integrated employment.

Project SEARCH — Students Exploring Alternative Resources at Children’s Hospital — was initiated two years ago through the ProMedica health system network. The program, started in 1996 at the Children’s Hospital in Cincinnati, Ohio, is a cooperative effort between ProMedica, the Lenawee Intermediate School District (LISD), Bureau of Services for Blind Persons, Goodwill Industries of Southeastern Michigan, the Lenawee Community Mental Health Authority and Michigan Rehabilitation Services.

Kurt Kominek, Project SEARCH program coordinator at the LISD, said the one-year internship aims to achieve competitive employment to students with disabilities students in their last year of high school.

ProMedica Bixby and Herrick hospitals offer a setting where students will experience training in a real-world workplace. Over the course of the school year, the students participate in three internships within the hospital setting as a way to explore and develop work skills in a variety of career paths. Last year, 13 departments — from respiratory therapy to maintenance — had interns within the three rotations.

“They start in September and go through July,” Kominek said, “where we work to raise their skill sets and get them exposed to new and different job tasks they can transfer to a job.”

Last year, when their six interns reached those goals, he said: “These students really want to work, and they are capable of working. They may do things a little differently, but they are productive in their jobs.”

Kathryn Szewczuk, supervisor of community outreach services for the Lenawee Community Mental Health Authority, said Project SEARCH is the perfect opportunity for students with disabilities to work side-by-side with staff at the hospital.

“They do real jobs; they’re preparing packages for the medical helicopters and checking oxygen tanks,” she said. “They do very critical work and help reduce the stigma for those with disabilities.”

Amanda Brooks, ProMedica Bixby and Herrick Hospitals human resources service specialist, said Project SEARCH carries immense value for the community and those it serves.

“Our community is very fortunate to have this type of opportunity available for students with developmental disabilities,” Brooks said.

The Project SEARCH staff, along with the ProMedica staff, are able to see positive change in the interns from their first day through graduation of the program.

“They are more confident, their social skills have improved,” said Brooks. “They understand how to follow policies similar to what they will experience as an employee, and they really change from a high school teen into an outstanding young adult ready to move into the work force.”

## UNIQUE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN MRS AND RCPD BRINGS MORE OPPORTUNITIS FOR SPARTANS



By Caitlin Van Ermen

*Caitlin Van Ermen is a senior human resources management student at Michigan State University. She works as the lead public relations coordinator for the MSU Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities.*

The Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities (RCPD) is well-versed in academic accommodation strategy, but recognized an opportunity to ensure that this preparation translates into careers for Spartans. With a new initiative, the MRS/MSU Collaborative Careers Project, students can achieve their potential to fully participate as leaders in the workforce. This endeavor developed a partnership with the Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS) and MSU’s Career Services and rooted its efforts to help guide scholars through a smooth transition into careers. For the first time in the State of Michigan, college students can access an MRS counselor on his/her own campus.

### Collaborative Partnerships

Two true Spartans recognized a way to help build our platform and empower students to move beyond expectations. Alumni Mike and Kathy Bosco founded and invested in the creation of the MRS/MSU Careers Collaborative. As leaders in the community, these Spartans know how strong academics can bring great careers.

Michael Hudson, director of the RCPD, said: "The Boscos were there with critical help as we sought to accelerate a focus on career outcomes. Their generosity made this program possible."



*Picture at left: Three generations of the Bosco Family united next to their plaque on the RCPD donor tree*

Tammison Smith, a Spartan from the Career Services Department, has been a ready partner and a key to the success of this collaboration. She said: "The Career Services Network is honored to be part of the Careers Collaborative."

Students may need help connecting with resources which can assist them in accessing employment resources. The Careers Collaborative is designed to provide students with a variety of new opportunities and make the process of accessing them straightforward."

Program facilitator and MRS counselor Kate Long joined team RCPD and uses her expertise from her vocational rehabilitation counseling position at MRS to work with program participants. She partners with the MSU Rehabilitation Counseling Program to support Spartans through career counseling and guidance with a focus on disability advocacy, employment readiness, workplace accommodations and job and internship placement. Kate brought in community leaders to host three outreach events as part of the Careers Collaborative Seminar Series.

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*"MSU students that have a disability should remember that they have as much to contribute in the workplace as anyone else."*

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## **Seminar Series in Action**

The Meijer Corp. reached out to the Careers Collaborative hoping to reciprocate the program's efforts to actively seek diversity, recognize different ability levels and employ persons with disabilities. The Meijer Corp. is a committed leader and a ready supporter of this initiative carrying abundant employment opportunities.

Professionals from the Meijer Corp. journeyed from Grand Rapids to Michigan State's campus to host a two-day event focused on interview skills and sharing personal journeys of individuals with disa-

bilities within this company. A Meijer supervisor, Marcelo Olivarez, spoke of his successful journey as an individual with a physical disability. Cecil Brown, a member of Meijer's Talent Acquisition team, and Dorrie Thompsett, a member from the Meijer Disability Management Team, united to share a corporate perspective. They told students soon to enter the workforce how to prepare for and find employment.



*At left. Kate Long communicates possibilities and provides guidance to students.*

Through Kate's one-on-one time with students, a majority of individuals identified concerns with the employment interview process. Students were unsure how to address accommodations with an employer, what questions employers are allowed to ask and if they should disclose a disability. Kate Long sought help from Stacy Hickox, an MSU faculty member who teaches employment law, civil rights and disability law at MSU's law school. Together they presented, "The ABCs of Disability Disclosure."



*Above: Stacy Hickox shared her expertise with a room full of engaged students.*

Stacy Hickox said: "The Americans with Disabilities Act was passed shortly after I started practicing law, so it was exciting to be involved in representing employees at that time. I also have a brother with a physical disability, and I've seen the challenges he's faced."

## Event Participants Took Advantage of the Q & A Session

As an author of a book about the Americans with Disabilities Act, Hickox's expertise proved to be valued by the participating students. She said: "MSU students with a disability should remember that they have as much to contribute in the workplace as anyone else; they just may need some accommodation to make that contribution. Don't be afraid to stand up for your right to receive such an accommodation, not only for yourself but for others who may not have the education or opportunities that you have."

The Seminar Series provides participants the necessary exposure to become a competitive contender in the job search game.

## WHAT IS MISSING FROM THE IEP PROCESS FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS TODAY

By Kimberly Sharpe



*I am a professional woman with a physical disability. I was born with mild cerebral palsy. I have always been determined to live life to the fullest and follow through with the things that I am most passionate about. At the age of 15 years old, that passion was to become an occupational therapist to work with children with disabilities in the school setting. I have been working as an OT in the schools for eight years. My knowledge, professionalism and life perspective has been forever changed because of this role. As an occupational therapist with a master's in rehabilitation counseling, I have training and expertise to understand the importance of employability of individuals with disabilities.*

In today's school setting, therapists are focused on data, respecting privacy, wording legal documents appropriately, and always finding the least restrictive environment. By nature these professionals are smart, compassionate, nurturing and strong communicators. Did I mention dedication to the jobs they do? It's through the roof! Schools and the education of the next generation is a business. This is a good thing, because more kids with disabilities are mainstreamed and receiving an education with their peers than ever before in history. There are no more state facilities, and parents more often than not attempt a public education rather than leaving their children with medical conditions or disabilities at home. The phrase "It takes a village" describes what occurs among my colleagues every day.

Growing up, it was very different. Individualized education programs (IEPs) and the laws that formed IEPs were just born. For me, having this new idea of an IEP and a mainstreamed education was a blessing. I had an experience that I wish all of my students and their parents could have. An IEP was never a threat or something a lawyer or advocate should attend. Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and other privacy laws did not exist. I really feel like this allowed the therapists and teachers to practice what they preached. Every day they focused on strengths and attributes they realized they had in their own adolescences. By nature they were smart, compassionate, nurturing, strong communicators who were incredibly dedicated

Those qualities shone through to assist my parents and helped me grow and flourish. Their training was in anatomy of the body, human and child development and how to rehabilitate. They had individuals who were trained colleagues to write reports and schedule one IEP meeting a year for each student. My team meetings were held in restaurants, my backyard, the auditorium of my ballet recitals, at church and even in a horse barn. The team meetings are still occurring after 33 years. I know, it's strange. Who would want to document one kid for 33 years? Maybe, just maybe the data that's been collected is that with a supportive educational environment, I graduated college and have maintained employment.

Since I was a child, there have been positive advances in medicine, rehabilitation and technology, and mainstreaming. I would be saddened if those were lost, but I must also ask, where's the balance? Although I realize that not every therapist can keep track of their kids for 33 years, our therapists, teachers and aides need the opportunity to use their intelligence, dedication, compassion and ability to nurture and communicate at all times. They can't be at their best when they're required to attempt to create a businesslike atmosphere instead of focusing on their strengths.

#### LINKS TO TWO GREAT TRANSITION RESOURCES

- [What to Know about Youth Transition Services for Students and Youth with Disabilities](#)
- [What to Know about Work-Based Learning Experiences for Students and Youth with Disabilities](#)

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