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Disabilities no barrier to careers

Swank initiative off to successful start at UD

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Ten minutes early was too late for Aaron Lewis.

Clock-in time for the 19-year-old's internship with the University of Delaware's grounds crew is 8 a.m. When the Bear resident started the job several weeks ago, he was waking up at 4:30 a.m. to catch two buses to get to Newark.

"The last bus I could get [to get to work on time] was the 7:47 a.m. and that's too close to being late," said Lewis, who cut his travel time when he began using DART's Paratransit service. "It's better to be early."

Brian Collins waters plants on the University of Delaware's Laird Campus on Friday as part of his internship. The News Journal/ROBERT CRAIG

Lewis and two other young men spend three days a week trimming, watering, weeding and otherwise working to keep the Laird Campus looking pristine in the face of rain, heat and plenty of foot traffic.

Their internships are the first to be created by the new Swank Employment Initiative. Funded by a three-year, \$1 million grant from the Howard W. Swank, Alma K. Swank and Richard Kemper Swank Foundation, the program provides career counseling and job placement services to men and women with neuro-developmental disabilities including cerebral palsy, autism and cognitive learning disabilities.

Each participant in the program works one on one with a Swank staff member to identify his or her strengths and to determine which careers are the best fit. The goal is not just helping clients find a job, but helping them find a position in a field that interests and excites them.

"We can no longer have our heads in the sand and think just because a person has a disability, we think they are incapable of being an integral, productive part of the community," Swank program coordinator Wendy Claiser said. "Employers need to realize that individuals with disabilities want to be treated like everyone else. They may need a job coach, they may need other means of support, but that doesn't mean that they want to be treated differently than anyone else."

Swank staff, who serve 18 clients between the ages of 16 and 64, talk to the clients about their skills, what they like to do and what they want to accomplish in life.

A client's skills might not always match his or her career goal, but their answers to those questions provide clues to finding the right fit in a job.

"For example, someone might have really good customer service skills, but they use a wheelchair and have only the use of one hand," Claiser said. "An office job as a data entry clerk or receptionist might not be the best fit. But they can be a greeter and they can answer the phone and be that kind voice on the other end of the phone."



The News Journal/ROBERT CRAIG
Aaron Lewis (right) and Brian Collins water a tree Friday as part of their duties on the grounds crew at the University of Delaware's Laird Campus. Both have internships through the Swank Employment Initiative.

One of the aims of the program is to create client internship opportunities on campus or in the surrounding community. Clients apply for jobs only after they complete an internship. Before participants start an internship or job, however, they visit different businesses with a coach who tests their ability to perform tasks required of employees working there.

"I want that individual with a disability out in the community, meeting employers and touring," Claiser said. "A person with a disability may have never been out to eat, they may have never stayed in a hotel."

When Claiser first approached UD's facilities department about placing interns on the grounds crew, "they didn't want to talk and they didn't want to listen," she said.

Limited finances was one of the hurdles the department had to overcome. Typically the grounds crew employs 14 students in the summer; because of the economic climate, they could hire only seven this year.

At first UD Grounds Manager Roger Bowman thought, "I don't have time and the staff doesn't have time to do this."

"As the meeting progressed, all of the sudden the Swank Initiative was on the table and as [Claiser] was laying out all of the things that were available to us as additional resources, I started to become more open," Bowman said.

The two groups kept talking and eventually department officials agreed to interview candidates for three internship positions. Claiser sent six candidates to interview for the jobs.

"The response I got was 'That means someone is going to get their feelings hurt,' " Claiser said. "Well, that's the real world. We don't always get the job we apply for."

Going into the interview process "we all had preconceived notions and opinions," Bowman said. "The students we interviewed totally dispelled that preconception. ... I think we hit a home run with the three students we selected."

Once Swank clients find internships or jobs, they receive on-site support from a coach who is there to answer questions and to teach the men and women how to advocate for themselves. Once the client no longer needs coaching, "we slowly fade and do follow-ups" Claiser said.

After several weeks working at the University of Delaware, interns Lewis, Brian Collins and David Limprun rattle off landscaping tips and tricks.

"I take home with me every day a lot of pride that I helped these guys just a little bit," said Paul Glenn, caretaker of the Laird Campus and the interns' on-the-job mentor and supervisor. "We don't want to lose them. We need them. They're as big a part of this organization as I am because without us, these plants would be dead. We haven't lost one yet."

The interns distribute about 6,000 gallons of water to the trees each week on Laird Campus. The plants require enough tender loving care that Limprun, 19, of Newark, likens to job to being "kind of like male nurses."

"This job makes you care," Collins, 18, of Wilmington, added. "I'll be at home and looking at the garden and I'll pick up a weed out of nowhere. I never would have thought about it before, but I think about it now."