NCTI 2009 Innovators Conference

Podcast Interview

Sheryl Burgstahler, Director, DO-IT, University of Washington

Transcript

Sure, I can go on a long time talking about that [implementing evidence-based practices for people with disabilities]. I'll tell you a little bit about, to put this in context a little bit, about the program that I direct, I founded the Do It program, and that was in 1992 and the idea of Do It was, the question we were trying to address is "What kind of practices might we implement to help teenagers with disabilities transition to college and on to careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics- STEM?" And I wrote a grant proposal to the National Science Foundation, and was funded to start this program. So I'll tell you a little bit about some of the interventions that we employ for teenagers with disabilities. One of our programs is called the Do It Scholars program and in that program we work with teenagers who have all types of disabilities: sensory, mobility impairments, learning disabilities, attention deficits, Asperser's, mental illness, attention issues, and so forth, and so we work with kids with a wide range of disabilities. They start in the program during their sophomore year in high school, and they come for multiple summer programs, we communicate year round on the internet, we give them computers, we actually loan them computers and any assistive technology they need to use in their homes thinking that some of them, even if they have technology at school, they really need it at home when they have time in the evenings and on the weekends to do their coursework. And we give them the assistive technology that they can use to be as independent as possible, I'll just give you one example. For a student who's blind in the Do It Scholars program, we would likely loan them a laptop computer with speech output technology, also the technology to convert text into Braille, give them an Embosser so they can produce their own Braille, and also give them a regular printer so that they can print their final documents on paper to turn them into their teachers. With this technology and an access to the internet, a student can do research on the internet, gather their own resources, develop a paper, print out a draft, continue to edit their document with speech output or in Braille and come up with their final paper that they would turn in to their instructor without the assistance of a sighted individual, and so we're helping students become independent and then also giving the tools they need to be productive. So besides being able to do it themselves, we're helping them be competitive with fellow students, be able to do as much work as their fellow students can do, ultimately college work and then on to careers. So they have technology through our program, they come for multiple summer programs where they live in a dormitory, they have a roommate who has a disability as well but different than their own, and they learn about college life, how to get through cafeteria lines, they

1000 Thomas Jefferson St., NW | Washington, D.C. 20007
Phone: (202) 403-5323 | TTY: (202) 333-3072 | Fax: (202) 403-5001
ncti@air.org | www.NationalTechCenter.org

learn about the disabled student services office at various types of institutions like at a community college versus a four year school and just see themselves on a campus and we help them then figure out what kind of a school would be best for them. This isn't a program where we're recruiting to the University of Washington, some of them come there we'd be happy to have them, but we help them make the best choice on what schools to apply for. And then the second year they come back again and we do kind of higher up activities, we have them work in small groups with faculty members so they get to be doing research and lab work and they then give a presentation about their work at the end of their program. And then the third year they can come back one more time and that time they come back in a work related role where they actually help in the program with the recreational activities, making sure everybody gets to breakfast on time, helping in the science labs, and the computer labs, and so they have a work opportunity and they do work really hard, they come a couple days early to get prepared for that. 5:00 And often people ask, "Well how can you employ all these students with disabilities into meaningful work positions when you have a group of people with disabilities to begin with?" And my answer's always, "Well if we can't do it then who's going to do it?" So we do it, we're the Do It program after all. But one of our most successful strategies is we pair students with a student with a disability different than their own, we use other criteria as well, for instance if they're helping in the computer lab we need them to have those skills, but imagine if you will for afternoon snacks that need to be put out, and put back, just the typical things you'd expect in a summer program if we pair up a student who's quadriplegic with a student who's blind and we ask the two of them to do that we know they have all the skills they need to complete that exercise, and both of them have to contribute in order to make it work, neither one of them have all of the capabilities that you need to do that task. And besides getting that work done, it models much of what we do in Do It and helping the students see, not what they can't do, but see how they can contribute to a science lab or a group activity or the day to day requirements of a summer camp. So we insist that everyone participate and they need to be creative in figuring out how they are going to participate. So one of our strategies for helping these kids be successful in the imperfect world that they are part of, they can't expect that when they go to college every faculty member is going to be accommodating, they can't expect that their future employer is going to know what to do with them, and they may not have a positive attitude about working with them, most likely they are just kind of confused about what a person with a disability can actually do, so we work with students to help them be prepared to communicate about their disability and be capable as far as computer technology so that they can find their way. For instance, we tell our students that when they go to college they should know what kind of technology they need and so that they can go to the computer lab folks and say this is what I need to access these systems, can you

1000 Thomas Jefferson St., NW | Washington, D.C. 20007
Phone: (202) 403-5323 | TTY: (202) 333-3072 | Fax: (202) 403-5001
ncti@air.org | www.NationalTechCenter.org

provide that? Our experience in working with post-secondary institutions is they're willing to provide, they need to provide accessible technology, but they might not know exactly what to get, and our feeling is whenever possible it's the student that should know what they need and that coming to college is the best time to be learning about how to use technology for college, you should be learning that earlier. Granted when you come to college, if you don't have those skills, then we in post-secondary institutions should help students develop those, but we're trying to help the students themselves in the Do It Scholars program be able to do those things. So the kids in the summer program, they do some mock interviews with faculty, for instance we'll bring in some faculty members, we like new faculty members each time, and the kids in small groups will pretend they're in a faculty member's class and introduce themselves and describe their disability to the faculty member and ask for an accommodation, and this is a very difficult assignment for high school students to do, because they're never asked to do it. They need to do that in college, but in high school they have mom and dad, and they have their special ed teacher, and they have the other teachers around making all these decisions for them, and then they leave high school and miraculously they're supposed to be able to talk to a faculty member at a post-secondary institution? I feel, I've been an educator most of my life and I think that you need to provide training for that and practice if you expect that to happen. So that just gives you some examples of the types of things we do with the kids. We communicate with them year round. During the summer program they meet each other of course, and get peer support. As I tell the parents, one of the best things that we do for their kids is give them a group of friends that will really challenge them and be aware of their disability but also their talents and they really encourage each other. But we also have previous participants, the interns and even beyond that, that continue to mentor the younger kids, and since we started in 1992 we have now a group of participants that are in their early 30s, and most of them are still involved in the program and how they're involved is they are on the internet in our discussion group and their role is to mentor these younger kids. Just the other day one of our students from our very first program in 1992, he was selected in 1992, Lloyd is his name, and he announced to the group that he just got married, and Lloyd happens to be deaf and has a degree in engineering. I remember when he started the program he didn't know sign language and he decided largely because of our program that he really needed to learn sign language because the science and technology and engineering fields were too complex for him to rely on his lip reading and so he learned sign language and he just happened to marry a woman who's deaf and so he's benefiting in that area too, by knowing sign language. But one of the things that we do that's rather unique is this longitudinal nature of the program, the very first night when kids come to the summer program, I like to say this when their parents are there before they drop them off and I tell them that it's competitive and it's very

1000 Thomas Jefferson St., NW | Washington, D.C. 20007
Phone: (202) 403-5323 | TTY: (202) 333-3072 | Fax: (202) 403-5001
ncti@air.org | www.NationalTechCenter.org

difficult to get into the Do It Scholars program, as you can guess by my description it's expensive and we have limited funds and so we take as many as we can but there's a limit. But I tell them it's hard to get in but it's a lot harder to get out. I am a woman of my word, and so I tell them we're investing a lot in them and we expect them to contribute a lot back. I also tell them that I'm not going to be satisfied if they're successful but they're not a contributor, and so I'll be happy for them if they have a successful career in engineering or whatever, but I'm not going to be fully satisfied unless I see that they are really contributing back by younger kids, not necessarily kids with disabilities, but really giving back, reaching down to the younger kids and helping them be successful, and we have a lot of examples of kids that are doing that.

1000 Thomas Jefferson St., NW | Washington, D.C. 20007
Phone: (202) 403-5323 | TTY: (202) 333-3072 | Fax: (202) 403-5001
ncti@air.org | www.NationalTechCenter.org