Tell us about Project REACH/APPLE?
Vickie: Through Project APPLE 750 students, at eight elementary schools, in grades K-6 receive from homework help, recreation, and enrichment activities, from seventy-two college students, who serve as AmeriCorps members. Members assist students with their homework assignments, engage them in specific literacy skills-building practice, and provide one-to-one or small group literacy tutoring to help develop reading proficiency through early intervention.

Who did you partner with to recruit students with disabilities?
Vickie: The transition specialists are staff members who work with students with disabilities, in our two district high schools. They help these students with post-secondary employment, education, and whatever they think they’re going to need after high school. The transition specialists identified high school seniors they felt would be successful in the tutoring program and then the students came into my office for an orientation.

How did your inclusion activities dovetail with your typical recruitment?
Vickie: For several years, we’d been recruiting high school seniors to complete their required government class volunteer hours with us but this is the first time we’ve focused on recruiting students with disabilities. We were hoping that the students who were in the special-ed programs would also become part of our regular pool of AmeriCorps members. That strategy has been working well for many years with the other students we’ve recruited. Many come back and enroll as AmeriCorps members.

How did you decide to assign students to particular volunteer activities?
Vickie: After the orientation with me, each student was interviewed by an AmeriCorps team leader. As part of that interview the team leader gave the student an interest survey, called “Student to Volunteer Transition.” The survey was designed to capture the interests and skill level of the student volunteer. We saw what the students wanted and then assessed what gaps we could fill within our own program, especially if we wanted to reduce adult to student ratio. That’s always a good use of a volunteer’s time whether they’re someone from the disability community or not.

There are a number of ways we can use volunteers. We use them in homework centers, and for read-alongs, story-telling, and homework assistance. They can also work with our enrichment activities if they have a particular interest in cooking, science, music or recreation.

After deciding upon a volunteer placement, each student was assigned to one of our after school sites. Each was also assigned to a team leader, an AmeriCorps member, who spent approximately 2 after school sessions getting them acclimated to the program.

This inclusive service project was supported by California Volunteers, California’s State Commission on Service. The Tarjan Center Service Inclusion Project works to increase the number of people with disabilities taking their places as community volunteers. For more information on the Service Inclusion Project or to share your own success story, call 310-825-0067 or send an email to kleventhal@mednet.ucla.edu.
How were the student volunteers supported and mentored?

Vickie: Each student spent 25 hours working alongside AmeriCorps members and team leaders. Also, transition specialists completed on-site observations of the students, while they were in the program.

Linda: Upon observation, students were engaged and actively participating. They gave us feedback on their experience. Our discussions revolved around balancing their schedules, getting along with co-workers and clearly defining their role in the volunteer setting.

What did the volunteers gain from their experience?

Vickie: We wanted to know that, as well. So we asked each student to complete an exit interview. They told us what they liked about their service, what they didn’t like about it, how they benefited from it, and how they thought the elementary kids benefited from it.

Linda: Our students in special education tend to be the recipients of volunteerism, not the volunteer. This experience gave them a new level of confidence that could not be mastered in the classroom. These students become more focused on their academic studies as this project made real world-work connections for them. The fact that students have continued to volunteer is a testament to the effectiveness of this project.

What made this initiative a success?

Vickie: Our volunteer retention was 100% for this project because all the volunteers were pre-identified by the transition specialists. The transition specialists were familiar with our program and they knew the students and their interests as they were involved in their individual education plans. So, the specialists were able to identify individuals that would be successful. In fact, it’s their job to guide students to avenues where they feel the student has a strong chance of success. This “informed referral” strategy was so successful that 50% of the students that volunteered with us through this initiative, decided to continue on past their required 25 hours.

What have you learned as a result of this project?

Vickie: Through outreach from the Tarjan Center/CaliforniaVolunteers Disability Inclusion Project, we were encouraged to replicate our current efforts to recruit high school seniors by including students with disabilities in our volunteer recruitment plan. We were already encouraging our government classes to volunteer with us. It never occurred to us that we could be doing the same thing with the students with special needs. We already knew the players, and we just needed to learn to think that way!

Disability inclusion can be right there in your backyard. You don’t have to reinvent the wheel and you don’t have to start off with a huge lofty goal and it could be something that you’re doing on a small scale to make sure that ALL Americans have an opportunity to participate in national service.

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