The Computer Technologies Program, of Berkeley, California, reached out to alumni with disabilities and asked them to mentor current students. As a result, seven students were hired for jobs in their field. Want to replicate their success? Read our interview with CTP’s Joan Breves.

Tell us about the Computer Technologies Program (CTP).

We’re a training program for people with disabilities. We train them for jobs in office systems and network support systems. We connect businesses with our students by setting up technical review boards. The business people interview the students and evaluate their work. It’s a great practice and networking opportunity for everyone. All students do a four-week internship to graduate from our program, so we also work with local businesses to develop internship opportunities.

Your project focused on a great source of volunteers that many programs often overlook—their own program alumni. Tell us why you decided to focus this initiative on alumni.

It fit with our mission. We wanted role models for current students. The graduates have been through the program, they understand how difficult it is. They feel good about their success and they want to give back. Also they offer disability educational information. So, for instance, if a graduate who is blind is successfully employed, they can tell a current student who is blind how they did it. This is also great because it gives the alumni visibility in the community and in their jobs. Their bosses and colleagues can see that they are out there doing something.

In your opinion, what was the most effective method for recruiting alumni to give back?

I called the graduates and basically said, “I need you.” It gets them to listen, at least. I explain why I need them, because of their technical expertise or because they might be able to help a student with a similar disability.

The Local Inclusion Network Collaboratives for Service (LINCS) at the UCLA Tarjan Center Service Inclusion Project is part of a national initiative in California, Hawaii and Florida, funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service. LINCS uses community collaborations to increase the number of people with disabilities taking their places as volunteers in community service. For more information on the California LINCS project or to share your own success story, call Karen Leventhal at 310-825-0067 or send an email to kleventhal@mednet.ucla.edu.
What were the different ways that alumni gave back to current students?

We had an employment panel. The alumni came in and talked about their disability, how they achieved what they never thought possible. Some of the alumni had had jobs before coming to us. Then the severity of their disabilities increased. By joining CTP’s training, by connecting with other students with disabilities, their self-esteem improved. They talked about the disability-related issues they came up against and how they got around those issues. They encouraged the current students.

The alumni also provided job shadowing opportunities. Traditionally, we ask businesses to offer 4-week internships to our students. Many were reluctant to get involved on that level, particularly with students with disabilities. This project helped us come up with another strategy. We asked the employers of alumni to provide one-day job shadowing instead. The alumni allowed current students to shadow them at work. Our intense request became a milder one, and in some cases job shadowing did turn into internships.

Statistically, it’s a challenge for many people with disabilities to find adequate employment. We often say that volunteering can be a road to employment. Your project creatively combined volunteering and employment. Can you say more about this?

I always tell my personal story to the students. Years ago, I volunteered with two agencies and on my birthday both agencies offered me a job. Nowadays, people are sometimes reluctant to volunteer—they say “I deserve to get paid.” That’s true but by volunteering, I tell them, I was able to successfully choose which job offer to accept, because I knew them. I had been at both places and knew which one I wanted stay at. So I tell the students, it’s not only do they like you and want you, but do you like them and want them. Volunteering will give you the opportunity to decide if you want to be there.

Teresa Flores works with CTP student Jerome Mims at the Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corporation. Jerome showed up for a job shadow day which turned into an internship. He is now permanently employed as an Administrative Assistant at TNDC.

Delfina Geiken, a volunteer from the City of Berkeley’s WorkSource employment program, reviews Carolyn Person’s PowerPoint presentation. Carolyn is a referral to CTP from the Veteran’s Administration. She is a veteran with a part-time job, a mother, and a student who is seeking better employment.

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Seven students were offered jobs as a result of this initiative, and more were offered internships. Were you surprised by the success of the project? What contributed to this success?

We already had the infrastructure and prior relationships. But the grant we got gave us more focus. We gave more energy and emphasis to recruiting alumni volunteers and to promoting the inclusion of volunteers with disabilities in general.

We constantly discussed it. Even though we work in this setting, many people said they never thought about how important it is for people with disabilities to volunteer. This initiative got them thinking.

People really started listening to what we were saying and in many cases it clicked. Even the businesses we work with and the non-disabled volunteers we have at CTP started saying, “I should ask people with disabilities in my own office to volunteer” or “I think my son might want to get involved in the community this summer.” Then things just started snowballing.

For instance, we had a board member without a disability who started making calls to her company, saying, “hey do you have any employees with disabilities who would want to be involved in this project?” In fact, she found a volunteer to help us upgrade our alumni database. Those extra steps hadn’t happened before. But now they are.

Tell us about one of your student’s success.

One of the students I worked with during the Job Shadow project has several severe disabilities; one is a psychiatric disability and another causes him pain and limits his mobility. In addition, his work history includes several terminations and he was very panicky about job interviews. However, during his computer training here he exhibited definite pluses in terms of employability: he always met due dates; he was always on time; despite a few brief emergency room visits, his attendance was very good; he asked questions when he needed to; he was personable and respectful of all staff and fellow students; he was really smart; and he really, really knew computers.

During job shadowing, he immediately hit it off with the supervisor and “co-workers”. They agreed to take him for a four-week internship. He so gained staff’s trust and respect that he was given the lead in some tech support situations, a very uncommon responsibility for an intern. He has been offered a contract position as a prelude to eventual permanent employment. Job shadowing afforded him the opportunity to show his capabilities without first having to cross the barriers a traditional job selection process would have posed for him.

Daphne Jesso, a CTP student who is deaf and a mother of two, enjoys her job shadow time with Delta Harris, Supervisor at Alameda County.

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How do you see this initiative building your organizations capacity in the long-term?

It has helped us look at the importance of people with disabilities in volunteerism. We have access to people with disabilities so we are going to promote volunteerism more, even if people choose to volunteer somewhere besides CTP. We are committed to educating people about including volunteers with disabilities.

Also, things snowballed. Many other people learned about us through this project. We got more volunteers. We were able to bring partners on board that were originally hesitant to offer internships. We’ve been made stronger in that way.

I’ve also had a couple of students tell me that when they are successful in their jobs they want to come and give back. In a year, those students will be back as alumni volunteers.

For more information about the Computer Technologies Program alumni volunteer effort contact Joan Breves, Executive Director at 510-849-2911 or joan@ctpberk.org.

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