

Co-op is Pre-Work: A Crucial Building Block for Students on the Autism Spectrum

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Abstract

Co-op is the pre-work that readies students for professional, meaningful employment upon graduation. Nowhere is this experience more critical than for students on the autism spectrum, whose full time employment rate is shockingly low. These students need distinct career preparation and deliberate onboarding steps to make pre-work successful. By being proactive with student preparation on the undergraduate level, we create a greater chance of long term career attainment for this population. The number of students on the autism spectrum attending colleges and universities continues to grow. Higher education is adapting to the academic transition of these students with programs and support, however, the professional transition requires equal attention. These are five tips for career services staff, educators, employers and parents to use in assisting with the pre-work process:

Advocacy: Allow students to speak up

Experience acquisition: Don't wait until college! Pre-work begins now.

Additional time and attention: Form a committee to address specific needs

Initiate a broader conversation: Connect to the university community

Jobs, employers and awareness: Identify employers who welcome diversity

Co-op is pre-work that equips undergraduate students to find full time professional, meaningful employment upon graduation. Co-op provides the foundation to build skills. It exposes students to new environments and norms. It provides practical information about a desired industry. Co-op exposes students to the 9-5, 40-hour week job. Co-op is critical for students on the autism spectrum. A 2015 study by the AJ

Drexel Autism Institute at Drexel University found that only 58% of young adults with autism held paid employment in the first 6 years after graduating from high school.ⁱ The study also indicated that 36% of young adults on the autism spectrum attended postsecondary education, with only about 40% actually disclosing their disability to their postsecondary school for accommodations of some kind.ⁱⁱ The number of

students who completed a co-op or internship is not known. However, these statistics give a window into the number of students on the autism spectrum attending college, graduating from college and in turn, seeking professional work placements.

With a 1 in 68 occurrence of autism in children,ⁱⁱⁱ it is no surprise these numbers are reflected in higher education. College autism support programs continue to grow throughout the United States. Autism resources vary from fee-based support college programs, voluntary (free) support college programs, standard academic support, and accommodations provided through the disabilities services office. Students on the autism spectrum will probably adopt at least one of these supports, as a smooth academic transition often ensures retention and success.

The professional transition is an equally important transition. Today's students enter college understanding the need to develop and explore a career path. Co-op and internship experiences are integral to career planning and have become the rule rather than the exception. At Drexel University, approximately 94% of our students participate in the co-op program.

My perspective on work readiness among students comes from 10 years teaching COOP 101, Drexel's co-op preparation/professional development class. Deficits are often more pronounced for students on the autism spectrum (or any student struggling with social interaction and/or communication skills). For example, students are required to write a resume for COOP 101. When a student struggles to complete the resume, often due to limited work, volunteer experience and/or extracurricular ac-

tivities, this is a red flag. Social and communication struggles often prevent students from gaining valuable experience outside the classroom. They quickly understand their experience does not compare to their peers. Another deficit I have observed with students on the autism spectrum is interview preparation. In COOP 101,ⁱ we break down the interview preparation process by conducting small group interviews in class and practicing an interview question each week. Students who have limited experience on their resume will have limited examples to share with an employer in an interview. I also observe student comfort levels as we practice weekly questions and during the mock interview practice and gauge improvement over the term. These are a couple of markers that give me insight as to who may struggle and need extra support going forward with the co-op job search.

The Drexel co-op job search is a self-directed process. The strength and challenge of our program is the independence and ownership of the experience. COOP 101 and the Co-op Advisor are two important resources available to all students. Due to the size of Drexel's co-op program (about 5,000 students participating annually, about 1,700 employers), our students must take initiative and access support during the job search as needed.

In light of the dismal employment numbers for young adults on the autism spectrum, distinct career preparation and more deliberate onboarding considerations are needed to make pre-work as beneficial as possible. Here are five tips career services staff, educators, employers and parents can use to shape a strategy for professional success:

Advocacy: Allow students to speak up

The path to independence for students on the autism spectrum begins as early as possible, certainly by high school. Well-intentioned parents, teachers and staff often readily intervene and sometimes grant preemptive exemptions. These actions do not move the student self-advocacy process forward. Student, parents, teachers and staff must work collaboratively, with student buy-in anchoring the decisions. In addition to crafting a transition plan for post-high school work (a federal requirement for special education students) mapping out the high school years with specific self-advocacy markers is essential. For example, a student contacting teachers directly about missed work/ make-up work is an important first step. The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting is another way students can speak directly about their academic needs. Full self-advocacy skills may not be realized by the time a student graduates high school, however, this is not necessarily a sign of being unprepared for college. Monitoring student growth and being mindful of opportunities to self-advocate are ways to measure proficiency over time. Student confidence, built over the years leading to college, can be hindered when parents involve themselves in college related situations. This does not mean FERPA authorizations are unnecessary or parents should not offer advice. Parents can support student action without taking action themselves and continue the self-advocacy momentum through the college years.

Once in college, the student needs to take charge of their interactions on campus and feel empowered to do so. It is prudent for parents to consider interventions in terms of both frequency and purpose. Teaching self-advocacy

skills is often difficult and counter to our instincts. However, the better the student self-advocacy skills, the greater likelihood of academic and career success.

Experience acquisition:**Don't wait until college! Pre-work begins now.**

Students should not wait until co-op or an internship to acquire experience. *Pre-pre* work provides a strong indicator of what the student can realistically handle now and will inform their professional job search in the future. This *pre-pre* work step can make a significant difference in skill development, understanding workplace culture and confidence. *Pre-pre* work can be a paid job or a volunteer experience. Any experience is helpful, so follow the students' interests. The experiences could be connected to a high school or community group or sought out independently. Parents and teachers should feel free to tap into their networks to identify options and educate potential supervisors on the challenges they may encounter with the student. Experiences sought independently carry the responsibility of the student disclosing their disability and seeking accommodations as needed. Experience acquisition can begin slowly: one day of volunteering which moves to regular weekend shifts which moves to a part-time summer position. Paid jobs are great too, but often carry higher accountability and more stress, depending on the job. No one wishes to be fired from a job, but if so, this is a teachable moment. The stakes are much lower at the *pre-pre* work stage. As a college student, encourage students to seek out work study jobs, campus jobs, volunteer positions or activities. The initial transition to college may absorb much of their time and energy, but gaining experience can be discussed in the broader context of their time as an

undergraduate. It is not too early or too late to increase and build on experience for the next career steps.

Additional time and attention:

Form a committee to address specific needs

For almost three years Drexel's Steinbright Career Development Center Neurodiversity Committee has used the principles of universal design to develop resources for any student struggling with communication and social interaction, which encompasses students with autism spectrum disorder, anxiety, ADHD and other challenges. We also provide ongoing professional development for our staff to be more effective in how to work with this population. Some committee accomplishments include career resources to review potential work environments, challenge assessments to identify strengths and weaknesses and job research for specific industries. These resources promote student self-awareness, which makes a difference in finding a job that is a "good fit". We have found that for students on the autism spectrum, a deeper assessment of "good fit" is not just useful but necessary. We also created a student goal checklist of professional behaviors while on co-op. These worksheets and checklists create structured discussions and constructive feedback.

One tactic devised by the committee is the "very useful lead-in", used for awkward student situations. The key words are "**our expectation**" and "**what I'm observing**". Here's an example of how a colleague would talk to a student who is exhibiting personal hygiene problems. The staff member would say: "**Our expectation** is you are neat and presentable day to day on your co-op job. **What I'm observing** is that your clothes

are dirty and smelly for our meeting today" and thus, a discussion begins. The positive feedback received from the "very useful lead-in" idea suggests that a simple approach can make noticeable difference. Due to the combined efforts of committee members, Drexel's career center now has an accessible "tool box" for our faculty and staff to better assist our students.^{iv}

Another idea is the Individualized Co-op Plan (ICP). The ICP is a one-time meeting of University partners to help a student having pronounced difficulty with the co-op job search, interviews and/or success on the job. Steinbright invites the relevant partners, outlines the student's struggles and works collaboratively to create a targeted plan for co-op success. ICP is modeled after IEP meetings, but is more informal. We have had a few ICP meetings thus far and they have yielded good results for the students. At the very least, it has promoted more cross communication between departments and staff on campus regarding students struggling with their co-op experience.

Initiate a broader conversation:

Connect to the university community

The Drexel Autism Support Program (DASP) is free to all Drexel students. Currently, 30 students are members of DASP but it is significant to note that membership is voluntary and it does not represent Drexel's total autism spectrum student population. DASP members are assigned a student mentor and participate in programming to ease the struggles of college transition. The AJ Drexel Autism Institute lends their expertise to assess areas where students are most vulnerable in a college setting and offer a personalized plan of action.

The DASP Advisory Board was founded in 2015. The goal of the board is to create a more inclusive environment of neurodiversity by creating awareness, empowering students and providing support. Board members include Steinbright staff and faculty, academic advisors, Student Life, Disability Resources, Residential Life, Student Counseling and the AJ Drexel Autism Institute. Two board members are parents of children on the autism spectrum. The Director of DASP provides updates on DASP member involvement and campus programming, such as the Neurodragons Student Summit. There is value in sharing perspectives and the different ways we support our students. At a university the size of Drexel, the benefit of bringing together concerned partners is a significant step toward making positive improvements for all students on the spectrum. For example, Residential Life now includes information on working with neurodiverse students in their Residential Advisor trainings. Academic Advisors are aware of the many supports available (DASP, academic, co-op) and can direct their students accordingly. Academic Advisors, in turn, have encouraged more information sessions for faculty in their respective departments to help close the loop of support and understanding for neurodiverse students.

Jobs, employers and awareness: Identify employers who welcome diversity

Many major companies are taking a lead not just in diversity hiring, but neurodiversity hiring. These companies are providing a tailored onboarding process to meet the unique considerations of these candidates and boost job retention. Ernst and Young has recently begun recruiting employees with autism for accounting positions. SAP, the German software maker, set

a goal to have 1% of its overall workforce with autism by 2020. The SAP Autism to Work program launched in 2013 is moving this goal toward realization. A Microsoft pilot program began in 2015 in the Redmond, Washington corporate headquarters for candidates on the autism spectrum. Google recently advertised “Inclusion@Google: Autism Edition Summer 2018 Internship Program”. The description is clear: “Google is seeking applications from individuals in the U.S. who identify as being on the Autism Spectrum and are interested in a technical internship in Software Engineering”. Specialisterne is an international employment agency dedicated to training people on the autism spectrum and locating job placements with major corporations. Large companies such as the ones just mentioned have the resources to support, grow and even outsource onboarding programs and inspire other companies to do the same. The Disability Equality Index (https://www.disabilityequalityindex.org/top_companies) publishes annually the nation’s best places to work based on a variety of criteria.

Despite these positive moves towards diversifying their workforce, a criticism of these structured corporate programs is that they cater almost exclusively to technical, engineering or science majors. Candidates must disclose that they are on the autism spectrum in order to be considered for the job, and evidence indicates they are not inclined to do so. Some people reject any label, especially one that may carry them through their professional life. The reality is that students on the autism spectrum are represented in all majors and industries. At the present time, the number of participants in these onboarding programs is small but the demand remains large for professional placements.

Students can research smaller companies and non-profit organizations with these questions to discern their commitment to diversity: 1) does the mission statement mention diversity? 2) is there an employee resource group for neurodiversity or disabilities? 3) is there a human resources staff person dedicated to diversity hiring? 4) is the organization involved in any community outreach related to diversity?

Networking is a powerful job search tool, and a personal connection to autism brings both sensitivity and understanding. If you know someone who's life is impacted by autism, contact them directly and ask: would you be willing to hire a co-op student on the autism spectrum? If this person does not make hiring decisions for their organization, ask if they could make an introduction on behalf of a student to their employer. In more far-reaching thinking, could we all explore diversity in our workplace to create

greater opportunities? Does your workplace have neurodiversity training for staff? What efforts are in place to recruit co-op students and interns on the autism spectrum? How do your recruiters handle students who may struggle in the interview with communication or eye contact? Is there mentoring available for all your employees? If the answer is no to any of these questions, step up and advocate change.

Conclusion

As part of the undergraduate experience, co-op jobs can serve a vital role in creating access to professional jobs. Presently, there is extremely little research on young adults with autism and even less on college educated young adults and their employment rates. By understanding the deliberate and specific preparation needed to support these students in their careers, professional goals will be attained.

ⁱ Roux, Anne M., Shattuck, Paul T., Rast, Jessica E., Rava, Julianna A., and Anderson, Kristy A. National Autism Indicators Report: Transition into Young Adulthood. Philadelphia, PA: Life Course Outcomes Research Program, A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, Drexel University, 2015

ⁱⁱ Roux, Anne M., Shattuck, Paul T., Rast, Jessica E., Rava, Julianna A., and Anderson, Kristy A. National Autism Indicators Report: Transition into Young Adulthood. Philadelphia, PA: Life Course Outcomes Research Program, A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, Drexel University, 2015

ⁱⁱⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Autism Spectrum and Disorder Data and Statistics
<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>

^{iv} Drexel University's Steinbright Career Center Neurodiversity Committee has made substantial progress as a volunteer group. In 2017, the committee and the Drexel Autism Support Program (DASP) secured a grant through a family foundation. The Neurodiversity Committee has since hired a graduate student to work with us on several initiatives and move forward with our goals.