

## **Circles of Support for Postsecondary Students With Intellectual Disabilities**

*By Courtney Taylor and Alice Kim*

“One of the things I am looking forward to is all of the learning opportunities that will be available to me. In the same way that the Circle of Support is intended to help these new Vanderbilt students, I think that I will have as much to learn from them. Everybody has their own unique life stories and experiences they bring into any new relationship, but in this instance I think everybody has so much more to learn from each other. These students have had to persevere in the face of challenges I have no experience with and overcome obstacles I couldn’t even begin to imagine. Though they have reached the incredible achievement of taking classes here at Vanderbilt, they will continue to grapple with new and exciting challenges associated with college life. I am enthusiastic about these new learning experiences, and can’t wait to get started.” ~Grace Avilles, Vanderbilt Undergraduate Student and Next Step Ambassadors

The idea of peer support in the lives of students with disabilities is not new. Though the approaches of organized models may differ, the positive effects and outcomes of peer support are undeniable. Research has shown that consistent participation in a peer support relationship can lead to academic improvements for both the student with a disability and the peer partner. Social interaction is increased, and the potential for long-lasting friendships and comfort is fostered (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Cushing & Kennedy 1997). Overall, a sense of community is created and maintained, which fulfills the basic human need to belong.

The peer support model is an essential element in the first postsecondary education program in Tennessee for students with intellectual disabilities. Next Step at Vanderbilt University welcomed its very first cohort of 6 students with intellectual disabilities and 30 peer mentors in January 2010. Each Next Step student was matched with 5 typically developing peers to form a “Circle of Support,” thus enriching the college experience. Coined “Ambassadors”—a play on the University mascot the Commodore—they function to model appropriate social behavior, to provide prompting and corrective feedback, to reinforce correct performances, and eventually to fade their assistance. This brief will

outline the development of the Ambassadors model and the process of selecting, training, coordinating, and evaluating the Circles of Support.

### **The Ambassadors Model**

Through discussion and planning with the Next Step at Vanderbilt steering committee (Associate Dean of Students, Human & Organizational Development faculty, Department of Special Education faculty and the Next Step staff members make up the steering committee), the following components of the Ambassadors Model were put into place.

- Circles of Support for Next Step students include 5 Ambassadors.
- Background checks are processed for every Ambassador working with Next Step.
- Two reference checks are required on each Ambassador. A free electronic survey is distributed for quick and simple reference data collection via email.
- An application is completed by the potential Ambassador to gain a better understanding of why they want to participate in the program and to assess interests to assist in the matching process.
- An agreement of minimum commitment is signed. Minimum commitment: 3 – 5 hours per week.
- Mandatory attendance at 3-hour training (held on a Saturday morning). Topics include:
  - People-first language and disability etiquette training
  - Case studies in break-out groups
  - Discussion of confidentiality issues
  - Outline of expectations.

### **Recruitment**

Recruitment efforts were targeted toward Ingram Scholars and other scholars, the Vanderbilt chapter of Best Buddies members, first-year undergraduates, and students involved in Greek Life. Notices were sent over a variety of student list-servs. The two information sessions that were held attracted around 20 students. When no students registered for the program after the information sessions and after learning that the original 5-hour per week time commitment was seen as overwhelming, the required

commitment time was changed to 3-5 hours per week. A brochure on the Ambassadors program was created and information flyers were hung across the campus. A booth was shared with Best Buddies at the Student Organization Fair, an event held at the beginning of each academic year to orient new students to campus organization opportunities. A total of 28 students were recruited to serve as Ambassadors for the spring 2010 semester.

### **Getting Started**

Once the Ambassadors were selected and had participated in the training session (see above for topics), the Next Step office hosted 2 social opportunities to allow the Ambassadors and the Next Step students to meet and to get to know one another. After the initial meetings, Ambassadors were asked for their preferences on which student they would like to support. A handful of Ambassadors had a specific Next Step student in mind. However, most said they had no preference and would enjoy being paired with any of the students. In the end, matches were made based on preferences and common interests.

-I paired Michael (an Ambassador) with Sean because we only had a handful of male Ambassadors and we wanted to be sure that we made the circles as "same-sex" as possible.

-We knew from Sean's interview that he was going to be a tough one for many of the Ambassadors to work with. Michael is very patient and very kind. However, by week two Michael came and spoke to me. He was having a very difficult time dealing with Sean. He asked if he could drop out from being an Ambassador!

-We brainstormed and we knew that Michael had a musical theater background from high school. Our Next Step students weren't in VU classes yet, but we were hoping that Jeanne would get into the class that Michael was enrolled in. Plus, Jeanne works much better with guys than ladies. So we asked Michael to try out being in Jeanne's circle.

-It ended up being that Jeanne did get into the class that Michael was in -- Musical Theater in America.

-It was a great swap and Michael enjoyed working with Jeanne much more and Jeanne loved it as well.

## Evaluations

It was important to evaluate the Ambassadors experience in order to monitor and to improve the process. When bi-weekly evaluations did not yield responses, surveys were sent out once every three weeks. This change in frequency greatly improved the return responses. Evaluations gathered feedback through an electronic questionnaire to gain an understanding of communication within the Circle and of how they were feeling (drained or energized) from the experience. Responses were rated on a 5-point scale. Questions included:

- Everyone in the circle has a positive attitude.
- My circle shares tips with each other on what's been going well and different problem solving methods that have worked.
- Do you look forward to your time spent with the Next Step student?
- Everyone in the circle has been dependable and responsible.

While the questions were certainly relevant, the evaluation tool needed to evolve as the semester progressed to get a better understanding of the Ambassadors experience. For the fall 2010 semester, evaluations have been split into 3 components to be administered at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester.

- Beginning of the semester – How's it going? Do you feel supported by the Next Step staff?
- Mid-semester – What do you notice about the performance/behavior of the Next Step student? If you are in a class with a Next Step student how is this experience affecting your own class performance?
- End-of-semester/Final evaluation – How has the Next Step program affected you? Has the program changed your perception of students with intellectual disabilities? Did you feel that you had enough resources through the semester?

To gather first-hand reflection and feedback, Next Step facilitators hosted two informal dinners for the Ambassadors. At one of the dinners, it was revealed that there were some difficulties working with a

few of the Next Step students. To address the issue, a behavior plan was put into place for these students and the student's parents were brought in to address the situation. The student, the Next Step staff, the parents and the Ambassadors (that were available) met to discuss the challenges and to go over the behavior plan that was drafted by the Next Step staff.

Other feedback from the Ambassadors revealed they wanted to be more involved in the process of developing individual programs of study and in the person-centered planning process. Ambassadors also wanted to meet monthly in their Circles of Support and to have Next Step staff develop a checklist to help them better structure their time with the Next Step students. Overall, the Ambassadors were very positive about their experiences.

There was noticeable growth both in the Ambassadors and in the Next Step students because of the relationship (See Table 1). These are not unusual outcomes. Research on inclusion and peer relationships says the “benefits to students without disabilities may include higher grades, improved academic performance, enhanced personal growth, increased awareness of disability issues, development of new friendships, and interest in pursuing careers in special education” (Hughes & Carter, 2008).

TABLE 1.

| Observed Growth in Ambassadors:   | Observed Growth in Next Step Students:                      |
|---|---|
| Daily planning: reflecting on the past day, setting goals, using a daily planner. Though these tools were set-up for the Next Step student, Ambassadors used them as well | Increased self-esteem                                       |
| Increased level of responsibility and professionalism   | Increased level of independence                             |
| Expanded definition of friendship   | Huge leaps in social skills                                 |
| Following through on a commitment   | Developing an understanding of the boundaries in friendship |
| Promoting the citizenship of Vanderbilt students  | Skills in problem solving                                   |
| Learning enhanced interpersonal skills and increased levels of patience   | Opportunities to be with their same-age peers               |
| Personal growth and a sense of accomplishment and making a difference   | The sense of being a part of a community                    |
| Building a caring and aware student body  | Learning to be self-advocates                               |
| Having fun  | Having fun  |

## Moving Forward

An important element of the Next Step Ambassador model will be tracking the Ambassadors once they leave Vanderbilt University. They will be contacted 1 year, 5 years, and 10 years after they graduate to evaluate the transformational aspects of their Ambassador experience and to see whether their career paths were affected by participation. The tracking will also gather data to see if we could tap into these future leaders as a job placement for Next Step students. These Ambassadors are in the Next Step students' peer group and the social enrichment has developed leaps and bounds of improvement in their social skills. The Ambassadors are the backbone to the success of the program because without them the Next Step program would not be making a transformational learning experience for all.

## References

Carter, Erik W., & Kennedy, Craig H. (2006). Promoting Access to the General Curriculum Using Peer Support Strategies. *Research and Practice for Persons With Severe Disabilities*, 31, 284-292.

Cushing, Lisa S., & Kennedy, Craig H. (1997). Academic Effects on Students Without Disabilities Who Serve as Peer Supports for Students With Disabilities In General Education Classrooms. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 30, 139-152.

Hughes, Carolyn & Carter, Erik W. (2008). *Peer Buddy Programs for Successful Secondary School Inclusion*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

## **Resources**

Carter, Erik W., Cushing, Lisa S., Kennedy, Craig H. (2009). *Peer Support Strategies for Improving All Students' Social Lives and Learning*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

**Do you have more resources that you used for the Ambassadors program?**