

Lessons Learned from Project Impact:

Community Service During the Transition to Employment for Youth with Disabilities



NextSTEP★
National Service To Employment Project

“Lessons Learned from Project Impact: Community Service During the Transition to Employment for Youth with Disabilities” is produced by the National Service to Employment Project (NextSTEP). For more information, please contact:

Sheila Fesko, Project Director
Institute for Community Inclusion
University of Massachusetts Boston
phone: 617-287-4365
fax: 617-287-4352
TTY: 617-287-4350
email: sheila.fesko@umb.edu

Jewel Bazilio-Bellegarde
Senior Training Officer for Disability Inclusion
Corporation for National and Community Service
phone: 202-606-6839
fax: 202-606-3477
TTY: 202-606-3472
email: jbazilio@cns.gov

NextSTEP is funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service (Cooperative agreement #09TAHMA001) and is a project of the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston. NextSTEP partners with the State Employment Leadership Network of the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services and the US Business Leadership Network.

Introduction:

Participation in community service has been found to break down barriers to employment, while building confidence, building careers, and building community for its members (NextSTEP, 2011). Opportunities such as Project Impact (see below for more) delivered through the Governor's Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service (Volunteer Florida) are an avenue through which youth with disabilities can gain skills, explore career paths, develop social networks, and engage in challenging and meaningful tasks necessary to gain employment.

This brief offers ideas for school-based special education professionals, transition specialists, and other disability employment professionals on supporting engagement in community service and the value of service as a transition strategy for youth with disabilities.

What is Community Service?

Community service means volunteering for a cause that helps people in a particular community. People volunteer and serve in many ways, both informally and formally. These opportunities are available through faith-based organizations, non-profits, governmental entities, and advocacy organizations.

National Service Programs funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service (<http://www.nationalservice.gov/>) include AmeriCorps VISTA, AmeriCorps State/National, AmeriCorps NCCC, and Senior Corps. Volunteer Florida runs Project Impact and administers national service programs in Florida.



What is Project Impact?

Project Impact is an intensive community service experience that is planned and implemented over a five-month period for youth with disabilities in Florida. It starts with a student-led community mapping exercise. In community mapping, students identify a community problem and the resources needed to address it. The students develop a plan for a service activity that will address the problem, and then implement the service activity. Youth are guided through the model by trained AmeriCorps facilitators and mentors.

Each month, students meet with peers and their facilitator. Together they decide on a service activity to address an identified community problem. They participate in regular reflection activities that allow them to consider the skills they are developing and the impact they are having in their community. Please see Table 1 for a month-by-month overview of Project Impact student activities.

Once the plan is developed, the students identify supplies for the activity and determine expenses. They discuss areas of collaboration with other entities in the community and a plan for marketing the service project. Together the students outline exactly how the service project will unfold, their roles, and their responsibilities. After completion of the service project, they reflect on and celebrate their accomplishment.

Through Project Impact, Florida AmeriCorps programs, in conjunction with a range of community partners, have implemented 30 community-service projects with 300 students with disabilities in 12 Florida counties.

Table 1: Project Impact Activities By Month

Month	Student Activities
January	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attend initial meeting with peers and facilitator• Receive overview of different service programs• Complete community mapping exercise• Identify one community problem to address• Choose a service project to address the identified problem• Participate in a reflection activity, discussing the link between service and employment
February	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conduct first planning meeting to complete service project• Identify resources (supplies) needed and determine project cost• Join a committee to complete tasks for the service project• Identify additional partners• Develop a plan to tell the community about the service project such as flyers• Apply for funds to support the project through Volunteer Florida• Complete a reflection activity, discussing the kinds of careers/ occupations associated with the service project
March	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify all necessary resources• Choose the location where service project will take place• Outline exactly how the service project will unfold• Finalize any marketing materials for distribution• Identify needed accommodations, such as transportation• Complete a reflection activity, discussing the implementation of these tasks and their connection to employment
April	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Complete service project during Global Youth Service Day• Participate in reflection activity, discussing accomplishments and how they relate to employment
May	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Celebrate and reflect on the completion of the service project• Complete a reflection activity, discussing what was learned, the types of skills built, how these skills might prepare for employment, and what type of careers they might consider as a result of participating

Project Impact Leads to Employability

We conducted 24 interviews with Project Impact participants about how the experience contributed to employment skill building and career exploration as part of the National Service to Employment Project (NextSTEP). For more on NextSTEP, see *Resources*. Participation in Project Impact influenced youth participants in three ways:

1. **Personal development.** Students experienced an expanded concept of their own talents and abilities, and increased their self-confidence.
2. **Vocational development.** Students practiced workplace skills and explored different career choices, interests, and options.
3. **Community development.** Students enhanced their connection to and integration into their communities in their new roles as problem-solvers.

Impact One: Personal Development

- **Expanded self-concept.** Youth viewed themselves in a new light, discovering abilities and talents of which they were not aware before.
- **Greater self-awareness.** These new discoveries made the individuals more cognizant of their strengths and thus more confident. Many young adults recognized abilities such as creativity, leadership, and courage. Students who previously struggled with low self-esteem or felt confined to their disability-specific labels reported seeing themselves as more successful after the service experience. They no longer saw themselves as “different” and “disabled.”
- **Sense of pride and accomplishment.** New confidence encouraged many youth to engage in new activities and to feel proud of what they had accomplished. Many of these activities were previously unfamiliar; conquering them gave the participants great satisfaction and confidence in their own abilities.

Continued on page 4...

“[...] it was a turning point for me. It helped me be more open and being more accepting and trying to make me break out of that fear, like I’m not labeled, I’m just like everyone else. But I just have one difference than some other people.”

- Project Impact Alumni



Impact One: Personal Development continued...

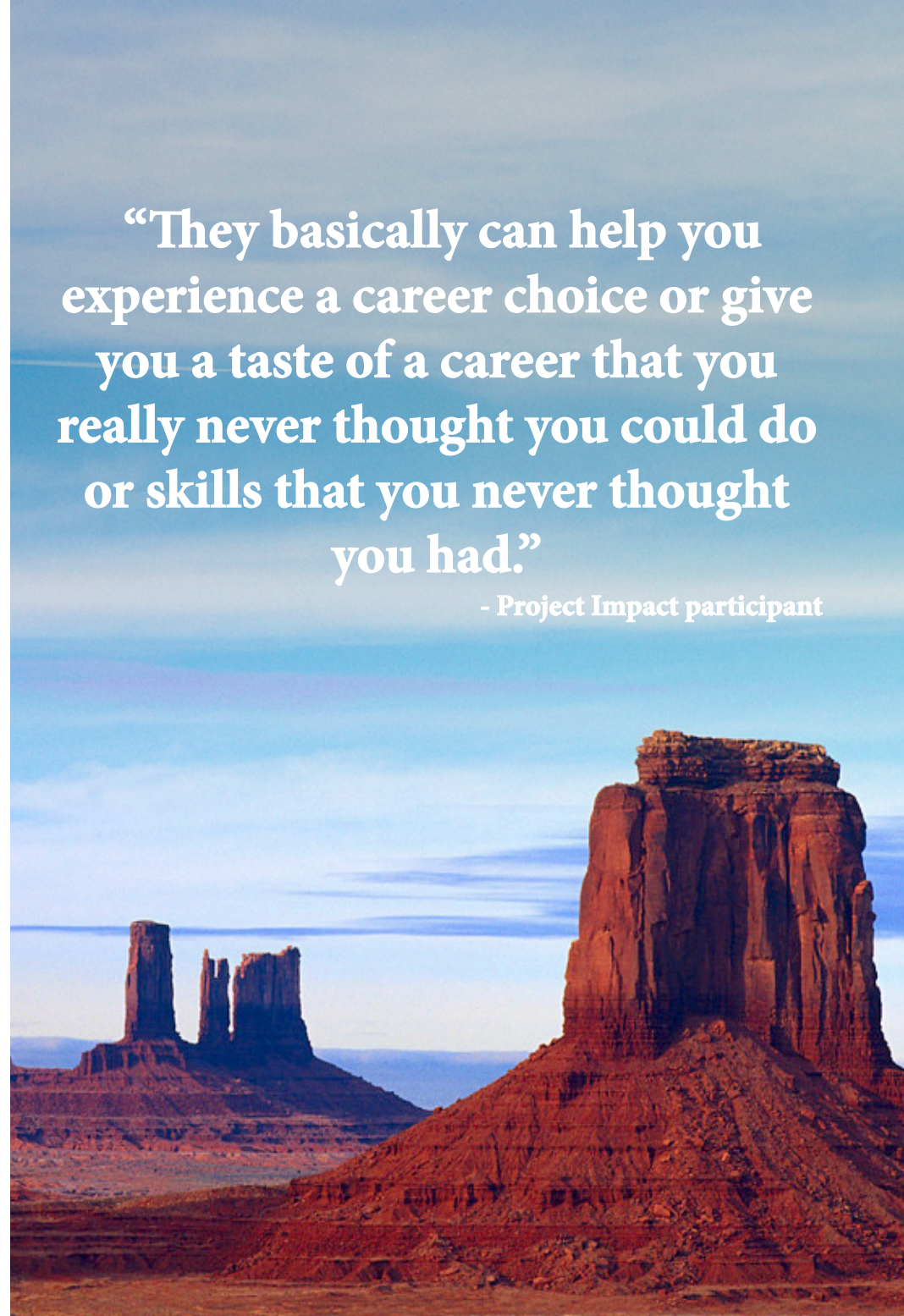
- **Adequacy and belonging.** Participation in Project Impact provided an opportunity to practice personal and professional interactions. Through these new friendships, networks, and connections, youth often felt they were contributing to and meaningful members of a group. Participants reported opening up to others and often feeling—sometimes for the first time—that they belonged and were just as worthy and adequate as anybody else.

Impact Two: Vocational Development

- **The opportunity to practice workplace behavior.** This included practicing and mastering the soft skills necessary for work, such as interpersonal, communication, time management, and teamwork skills. Young adults also had an opportunity to develop their work ethics—personal responsibility, collaboration with others, and being dependable and accountable. As a result, youth increased their employability and developed identities as employees.
- **Trying out different roles and experiences.** The experience helped youth narrow down their career choices and workplace preferences. By doing a variety of tasks (woodworking, helping children to read, caring for animals, creating flyers), they could discover strengths and talents that contributed to feeling more capable and confident as a future worker. Sometimes these tasks were unfamiliar, overwhelming, and challenging; after completing them, youth expressed pride and increased confidence. In the end, participants became more aware of what their future career might look like. Will they work in an office, work outside, have direct contact with people, or be independent? Will they want to do something creative? Project Impact helped many to get closer to a clear vision of their future career.

“They basically can help you experience a career choice or give you a taste of a career that you really never thought you could do or skills that you never thought you had.”

- Project Impact participant



Impact Three: Community Development

- **Increased connection and integration.** Participants changed the way they viewed their surroundings and their role in society. Through community service, the young adults were able to interact with a variety of people of different ages, backgrounds, and cultures in their communities; people with disabilities and without. For many, this was an opportunity to experience communities different from their own immediate surroundings for the first time. They learned how to accept others and how to feel accepted in a large group. They reported that participation made them feel more included in their communities.
- **Viewing themselves as providers.** Many of the youth came to view themselves not as recipients of services, but rather as providers of solutions. Participants mentioned wanting to “help other people” as a result of their Project Impact experience.
- **Sense of ownership and meaningful contribution.** Hands-on participation and completion of the project made the youth feel that they were important and capable contributors. Seeing positive outcomes of their work gave them an empowering sense that they are capable of doing something very important for their communities.

“...they’re able to go out and have that joy—receive that joy of giving back to their community, too. And that makes people feel good. It makes them feel good. It shows them that...there are a lot of things they can do.”

- Project Impact Facilitator

Recommendations: Community Service and Transition

Interviews with Project Impact participants indicate that the service experience positively influenced students personally, vocationally, and within their communities. Through increasing their self-confidence, learning and practicing workplace skills, trying out different vocational choices, and providing meaningful solutions to problems in their community, they have become more employable.

Employability, or the ability to gain and maintain employment, can be achieved only when an individual has acquired assets that can be presented to employers. As a result, community service experiences such as Project Impact can be a great option for youth with disabilities transitioning between secondary school and adult life. Statistics support that youth with disabilities experience higher dropout rates, lower post-secondary education participation, higher unemployment rates, and higher levels of poverty than their peers without disabilities (National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, 2012).

In response to such challenges, the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Y) suggests that all youth need:

- Access to high-quality, standards-based education, regardless of the setting
- Information about career options and exposure to the world of work, including structured internships
- Opportunities to develop social, civic, and leadership skills
- Strong connections to caring adults
- Access to safe places to interact with their peers
- Support services and specific accommodations to allow them to become independent adults

Consider the following NCWD/Y Guideposts For Success, and how community service can help youth attain them:
www.ncwd-youth.info/guideposts

Guidepost 1

School-Based Preparatory Experiences grounded in standards, clear performance expectations, and graduation exit options. Community service can:

- Provide informal career and interest assessment by trying out different roles and experiences.
- Provide learning experiences in a community setting, creating opportunities to define what their future workplaces and careers might look like.
- Provide a concrete activity relevant and valuable to any Individual Education Plan.

Guidepost 2

Career Preparation and Work-based Learning Experiences that expose youth to a range of experiences. Community service can:

- Increase employability by developing soft skills. These include interpersonal, communication, time-management, and teamwork skills.



- Expose youth to new career ideas and people of diverse ages, backgrounds, and cultures—people with disabilities and without.
- Provide an opportunity to gain real-world experience.
- Allow youth to gain perspective on abilities and limitations in a work environment.

Guidepost 3

Youth Development and Leadership through coordinated activities that encourage competency and self-esteem. Community service can:

- Encourage and empower youth as they discover their abilities and talents.
- Create opportunities to develop, practice, and master problem-solving skills.
- Develop personal goals and objectives through exploration and reflection activities.
- Enhance self-esteem and self-advocacy skills through the pride and satisfaction of addressing a community need.

Guidepost 4

Connecting Activities such as programs and services that help them gain access to chosen post-school options. Community service can:

- Develop a commitment to service as another post-school option.
- Increase access and connection to employment, education, and community resources through newly formed networks comprised of peers, mentors, and professionals.
- Increase exposure to businesses in the community through intentional consideration of how future employment connects to the service project.

Guidepost 5

Family Involvement and Supports to promote social, emotional and occupational growth. Community service can:

- Connect youth with mentors and other caring adults.
- Expand peer and professional networks that can be used for occupational growth.

Starting Collaborations

Collaboration with service programs can benefit schools as well as the service program. While schools can create community service opportunities for youth that allow them to gain valuable experience, service programs gain access to qualified, committed participants. The local service community may be unfamiliar with the school and disability community, and vice versa. Therefore, a critical first step is learning more about each other.

The most successful collaborations are built on knowledge, trust, and relationships that are mutually beneficial. It is important to become familiar with the service programs in your community and vice versa. Here are some logistics to help you:

- There are points of contact for each state's disability inclusion initiative. Contact your state's coordinator to learn more about the range of service options in the state and how youth with disabilities can be included:
<http://serviceandinclusion.org/index.php?page=coordinatorslist>
This person, or other members of the service commission, can help

you identify service programs in your community. They also may be able to share examples of this type of partnership occurring in other parts of the state.

- Once you've identified a local service program, set up short, informal meetings with its leadership. Be prepared to explain your program and the goals you hope to achieve.
- Invite service staff to meet school staff and students. Ask them to present an overview of the community service options other youth have engaged in recently.
- Coordinate a service-day for students to serve at an organization or within your school community.
- Service programs often have state- or county-level conferences and meetings. Present a workshop or attend sessions where you can stay abreast of local initiatives.

Adapted from *Creating an Inclusive Environment: A Handbook for the Inclusion of People with Disabilities in National and Community Service Programs*

www.serviceandinclusion.org/handbook/index.php?page=sectionix



Replicating Project Impact at Your School

- Create structure—establish a timeline for identification and implementation of the service project and stick to it.
- Create formal agendas for each planning meeting that ensure full participation. Allow time for discussion about how each activity is building a skill needed for employment.
- Incorporate regular reflection activities that create an intentional platform for connecting each phase of the experience to skills gained and future career options.
- Use team-building exercises to increase peer connections, promote group problem solving, and build decision-making skills.
- Use committees to plan and implement different aspects of the project.
- Consider assessing the physical space and attitudes/sensitivity of staff at the service location. Provide accommodations and etiquette training as needed.

Formal National Service as a Transition Option

You may have students who are interested in participating in more of a formal service opportunity, such as the national AmeriCorps programs. These service programs have members who volunteer full time or part time. They provide a structured opportunity for individuals to gain experience, work skills, and connections they can use later in job search.

To participate in AmeriCorps programs, students need to have completed high school, have a certificate of completion or be working towards a GED. Here's how to find out more about AmeriCorps for students you are working with:

1. Look at the service programs listed on the AmeriCorps website:
www.americorps.gov/about/programs/index.asp

See how they relate to each youth's interests, abilities, and location. Use the interactive program selector to help choose the right program:
www.nationalservice.gov/for_individuals/ready/selector.asp

If the student is planning on staying local, you may want contact the state service commission and disability coordinator to learn more about in-state service options.

2. Identify skills and behaviors that the individual can work on in preparing for a potential service experience.
3. Help the young adult apply for a service program. Most service programs have an online application process. Remember, this is a competitive process, so they will not automatically get selected to serve. It may also take some time for applications to be reviewed. Many service positions require a formal interview—an excellent opportunity for building job-search skills.
4. Discuss any accommodations necessary for working at a service program, and create a plan for support and monitoring progress toward personal and vocational goals. Engage your state's department of vocational rehabilitation in the process.

Conclusion

Community service experiences such as Project Impact offer youth with disabilities the opportunity to build the personal and professional skills necessary to be employed. Community service during the transition from school to work is a way to get real-world work experience, explore careers, and practice and master the soft skills essential for employment.

Through the recommendations in this brief, disability professionals working with youth can promote involvement in service as a means for developing skills, facilitating personal growth and community connections, and creating a pathway to meaningful employment.



Resources

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) engages more than 5 million Americans in service every year.

CNCS website: www.nationalservice.gov

Service stories: www.nationalservice.gov/for_individual/current/stories.asp

The National Service to Employment Project (NextSTEP) conducts research, provides technical assistance, and creates demonstration projects focusing on people with disabilities in volunteer and community-service roles.

NextSTEP website: www.serviceandinclusion.org/nextstep

Facebook: www.facebook.com/service2employ

Twitter: @Service2Employ

The National Service Inclusion Project (NSIP) provides training and technical service to help national service programs include individuals with disabilities as active participants.

NSIP website: www.serviceandinclusion.org

Service stories (audio): www.serviceandinclusion.org/index.php?page=participants

The Governor's Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service, Volunteer Florida grants funds to Florida AmeriCorps and National Service programs; encourages volunteerism for everyone from youth to seniors to people with disabilities; promotes volunteerism for disaster preparedness and response; and helps to strengthen and expand Volunteer Centers in Florida.

Volunteer Florida website: www.volunteerflorida.org

**Lessons Learned from Project Impact
Community Service During the Transition to Employment for Youth with Disabilities**

NextSTEP website: www.serviceandinclusion.org/nextstep

Facebook: www.facebook.com/service2employ

Twitter: @Service2Employ

