EXECUTIVE SUMMARY for the NCWE Exemplary Program Awards

The Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) is excited to open its doors to individuals who have significant and persistent learning disabilities by creating a supportive environment as students develop and master skills required for the world of work. CCAC offers five (5) vocational training programs to students who need learning supports, with a small teacher to student ratio (1:6). CCAC recruits, assesses, trains, and places students in competitive employment, and provides follow up services to employers and students alike.

CCAC provides these vocational training programs to approximately seventy-two (72) students per year in the areas of Nursing Assistant, Health Care Technician, Food Service, Environmental/Janitorial, and Indoor/Outdoor Building Maintenance. Each program consists of two academic semesters, using state of the art, industry specific equipment and supplies, which provide students with theoretical and hands-on training.

The partnerships and collaborations involved with these vocational training programs are vast. These CCAC vocational programs work very closely with the State Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Department of Public Welfare, CareerLink, approximately fifty-five (55) regional school districts, and many community based organizations that serve individuals with disabilities within the region. The success of these programs is based on competitive employment for each student upon completion of their training.

A vital aspect of these training programs is the close working relationships with employers. CCAC places 98% of its graduates in jobs, primarily full-time benefited positions, with many of the large, medium, and small employers within the region.

Historically, individuals with significant and persistent learning disabilities were rarely afforded the opportunity to work in the competitive employment arena. These individuals are now making career choices and have the opportunity to become economic contributors of society. Not only do these individuals become more independent, but also employers are reaping the benefits of employees who are hardworking, accountable, reliable, and well trained in the industry of their choice.
PROJECT DESCRIPTION for the NCWE Exemplary Program Awards

Community County of Allegheny County (CCAC) Vocational Training Programs for Individuals Needing Learning Supports serves individuals who have a desire to train for a fulfilling career. These students participating in CCAC’s learning supports programs are individuals who have significant and persistent disabilities (intellectual, behavioral, learning and/or emotional disabilities). Students accepted into these programs have chosen to prepare for, obtain, and maintain competitive employment in the following fields of study: Nursing Assistant, Health Care Technician, Environmental Services/Janitorial, Indoor/Outdoor Building Maintenance, and Food Service.

PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS

The Vocational Training Programs for Individuals Needing Learning Supports receive referrals primarily from the State Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. CCAC also works with approximately fifty-five (55) regional school districts, the Department of Public Welfare, community based organizations including CareerLink, and parents/families of individuals with significant and persistent disabilities. In order to recruit students to these programs, the vocational department holds three informational presentations each calendar year for high school transition coordinators, community based organizations, potential students, and family/caregivers. The following are offered throughout each semester; individualized tours, job shadowing opportunities, and high school presentations. The partnership with a potential employer begins with an invitation to tour each program and opportunity to discuss hard and soft skill job expectations. This is a win-win situation as the students learn employer expectations and the employer is able to see, first hand, skill sets the students are learning in the classroom and lab.

Each program develops an evaluation tool that assesses industry specific skill sets. Faculty is in frequent contact with employers to ensure the skill sets being evaluated meet all industry standards. This includes work skills as well as behavioral expectations on the job. The faculty collaborates with many of the small, medium, and large companies who employ individuals in these five industries. As part of these programs, during the second semester, students are required to complete a four to six week practicum or clinical rotation experience. The faculty works closely with many regional employers such as; hospitals/long-term care facilities, restaurants/food purveyors, cleaning companies, large box stores, and museums. This affords both the employer and the student to learn about each other and the goal is for employment to commence after the practicum or clinical experience. Following the practicum or clinical experience, 98% of graduates are placed with the same employer. This model is a success because it reduces additional training costs for the employer and the student enjoys consistency with the same employer; a win-win for both.

Students in these programs receive employment-coaching assistance in gathering appropriate personal information to build a professional resume, employment portfolio, and learn to conduct appropriate
correspondence with community businesses. Moreover, program faculty provides individualized job matching, and placement within a close proximity to a student’s residence. The priority is to place a student where public transportation is readily available and within one, but no more than two public transportation zones. These programs of study are part of the local Workforce Investment Board and are part of the high priority industries for this region. In the event a student needs remedial skills training after placement, CCAC faculty will provide the training to the student at the employment site. The vocational training programs provide a lifetime commitment to graduates for continued employment success.

**ECONOMIC IMPACT**

CCAC’s Vocational Training Programs for Individuals Needing Learning Supports equips approximately seventy-two (72) students per year with more than just the skills necessary to get a job in their chosen field. The two semesters of training includes “overall” training for the world of work. From the beginning of these programs through graduation, a student will experience the benefits of learning the importance of what it takes to be a successful employee. The goal of these vocational training programs is to train and place students in the competitive employment arena. Each year, ninety-eight percent (98%) graduate and work in the competitive job market. Not only do the employers benefit from well-trained, competent, reliable, consistent, and dependable employees, but also students become economic contributors to society. Being an economic contributor means not only are they paying taxes, but also they are now becoming more self-sufficient and have purchasing power. Students can now begin to live independently, budget for daily living expenses and begin to experience being a vital member of the community by attending social, cultural and civic events, for they now have discretionary dollars to do such activities.

In addition to those benefits mentioned above for employers, there is another vital economic impact. That is, employers are diversifying their workforce by hiring individuals with disabilities. Research shows that employers who employ a diverse workforce have more productive, enriched, and motivated employees. Individuals with significant and persistent disabilities are certainly a part of a diverse and inclusive workforce. Although one cannot always put a dollar amount to inclusion, there are certain economic gains to the community when all members have an opportunity to make a contribution.

**PROGRAM RESULTS**

CCAC is proud to report that each year ninety-eight percent (98%) of the approximately seventy-two (72) graduates per year are competitively placed in either full-time or part-time employment. The ideal placement is a full-time, above minimum wage, benefited position with opportunities for possible career advancement. As part of the individualized job-matching program, there are times, typically due to a special need, when the graduate will be placed in a part-time position initially. This part-time employment
allows students to increase stamina, and to concentrate at a smaller scale, on the tasks required by the employer. CCAC’s vocational training programs require students to attend twenty-seven (27) hours per week of training for thirty (30) weeks. CCAC programs are modeled to replicate the work environment; the training hours of these programs were designed to prepare the students for a workweek within competitive employment. A student who begins employment on a part-time basis is often able to make the transition from part-time to full-time employment after a brief adjustment period.

The success of this program is due to the commitment of the college, dedicated faculty, and students. The key components to the success of these programs are; a well-developed recruitment plan, a flexible curriculum that addresses the current needs of employers in the five (5) areas of study, the strong partnerships and collaborations with community partners and employers, appropriate student and employer driven practicums/clinical sites, strategic competitive job placement. In addition, CCAC offers follow-up services to the employer in the event the student is having difficulty with assigned tasks or is required to learn new tasks or equipment. Above all, the students enjoy being an integral part of college life with other students their age, and gain the confidence required to achieve success.

**REPLICATION**

CCAC’s Vocational Training Programs for Individuals Needing Learning Supports are structured in such a way that it can be replicated in any state and in any institution of higher education. The components of a successful program include developing a fee-for-service contract by engaging the state vocational rehabilitation agency in this endeavor. The State Office of Vocational Rehabilitation pays for all program costs associated with the training, including bus passes, for students to travel to and from the training sites, practicum/clinical sites, and in some cases to and from the competitive job site.

The vital components for replication are; a strong relationship with the counselors at the state rehabilitation agency, collaboration with the transition coordinators at local high schools, dedicated faculty that understand the needs of students with significant and persistent disabilities; a small teacher to student ratio (1:6), and a partnership with local employers who seek to hire people that are well trained, dependable, and hard working.

An important component to replicating these programs is the college commitment to providing space (classrooms/labs) to create experiential learning where students receive hands-on as well as theoretical based training. Vocational training students have the opportunity to become an integral part of college life affording them the opportunity to participate in the extracurricular activities that the college offers to all students. CCAC is willing to share its curriculum, faculty job descriptions, and the template used for the fee-for-service agreement with the vocational rehabilitation agency. In addition, CCAC is willing to serve as a consultant to any college that is interested in developing vocational training programs for individuals with significant and persistent disabilities.