

## **The Impact of Community Involvement on Student Development in the Center**

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Community involvement has played a big part in the development of the Communication Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). The Speaking Center at UNCG has sustained a fruitful partnership with local community members, including that of Peacehaven Community Farm, which is a living community for adults with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities for the last four to five years. The partnership with Peacehaven has consisted of visiting the live-in residents every Friday for one hour to work on developing their communication skills. Over time, this partnership has developed to encompass more than just coaching the four live-in residents, but has progressed to be accessible to the entire community. According to the director of the UNCG Speaking Center, “By listening, accepting, and engaging with all student experiences, we are able to teach students things that we might not be able to in a non-reflective educational environment” (Cuny, 2018). For this reason, as a student in the Speaking Center I have found a multitude of opportunities from this partnership. I was given many opportunities to develop my leadership skills, as well as learning to create and write objective-oriented lesson plans. In addition, I have discovered my passion for working with adults with disabilities in a safe place. I believe other Communication Centers would find value in partnerships like this one for not just members of their community, but to provide

opportunities for development for their student staff.

Last summer, Peacehaven invited the Speaking Center to bring training and coaching to a program hosted by Peacehaven. This program, called Julian and Friends, would provide 10 weeks of job preparedness skills for four adults with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities with the goal of helping them get jobs by the end of the summer.

As a communication consultant in this program, our mission was to develop lesson planning that would provide the participants the necessary oral communication skills to obtain a job and thrive once hired. Initially, our director and I did a day of observation in which we watched to see how each of the individual participants functioned, and the roles that they naturally assumed. We took notes and recorded video footage, so that we could later go back and develop lesson planning based on what we saw.

The next day, we asked if we could interview each participant to allow them to set their own oral communication goals for the duration of the program. We were met with excitement, hesitancy, and a bit of resistance as we adapted to working with each of the participants, and as they too adapted to us. Each of the participants were at different places, and we strived to meet them where they were. This meant we needed to develop lesson planning that would allow us to meet the specific needs of each participant, but could also be facilitated

within the time restraint of one hour twice a week.

With that being said, this program allowed us to develop a pretty solid understanding through trial and error of what kinds of lesson plans worked with the four specific participants we had. For example, we had one participant who was very high functioning, and, through a lesson plan in which we presented information about ourselves to others, we learned that she had earned an English degree from a local private college. This was quite the contrast to the abilities of the other participants. Our lesson planning then needed to be designed in order to give this specific participant the ability to build on her existing skills and assist in facilitating activities. At the end of the 10 week program, we received positive feedback from Peacehaven and community members regarding our activities and lessons, and we were inspired by the support we received.

At the end of this program, we saw an opportunity to meet a need in the greater Greensboro Community. We started conversations about extending this programming to the greater community with Peacehaven leadership. Together, we decided that we would want to begin an hour-long open session for adults with disabilities. We would include our friends at Peacehaven, who would serve as cosponsors, and focus on furthering their communication and leadership skills. The new program would be called Let's Communicate. We took the five lesson plans from the summer that were well received among the Julian and Friends participants, and set out a structure for the semester spanning over 10 weeks, repeating each lesson plan twice. We set up an Eventbrite page, a website which allows event administrators to create an event and communicate with participants, to allow

caregivers to register their participants. We determined that we would allow up to 15 participants, including the Peacehaven four core members.

When this program piloted in the fall, we were met with lots of excitement but I quickly realized this was a significant change in dynamic from the smaller group I worked with in the summer. I had gotten a small taste of what it was like to need to adapt the lesson plans to meet the different needs of participants the past summer, and when the programming began in the fall I realized that I would need a bit more assistance in planning. We included one of our staff members who joined me in leading this project. She is a Special Education major, and provided me with detailed feedback on the lesson planning each week. As we acclimated to the new format of the program, we realized that we had a lot more variation in participant attendance from week to week than we had experienced in the summer. For this reason, we had to prepare more adaptable lesson planning in order to meet the needs of the participants who were present each week, as participant attendance varied. For example, some of our activities included giving an introductory speech about yourself to the group, but there were some participants who are non-verbal. For this reason, we asked participants to draw out the things they felt represented themselves.

With that being said, we learned quite a few lessons in this process. First, we learned that when working with adults with disabilities, you need to be prepared to adapt programming in order to fit the needs of the participants. Secondly, we learned that with an open enrollment program such as this one, and not having a prior relationship with the participants, you need to be prepared to further adapt the lesson planning when you arrive in order to meet the needs of the

particular week. The implications of the relationships we have built through this programming have been imperative in our community involvement, and we have learned so much through this process. Not only has this been a great experience in developing my leadership and administrative skills as a leader on this project, but this has allowed me to discern my future career. From a student perspective, this program has provided myself and many other Speaking Center consultants with invaluable experiences working with populations outside of their comfort zone. Incorporating these types of partnerships will allow your center to practice adaptability while providing opportunities for growth. As a student who has been deeply moved and impacted by community involvement through the Speaking Center at UNCG, I encourage you to seek out community partners to provide opportunities for invaluable experiences for student consultants.

### **References**

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