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RWU Students Work with Organization that Helps Intellectually Disabled Students Transition to Jobs

This hands-on experience shows how community-engaged writing projects help students develop key writing, teamwork and research skills



Rachel Hartung (left) looks over a presentation with Aaron French, a staff member, and Derek Patsos from the Rhode Island Transition Academy at Roger Williams University, an on-campus partner. Recently, the students from the Writing 400 that worked with the Transition Academy and their professor, Nancy Nester, received a certificate of appreciation from the Transition Academy for their work.

June 22, 2018 | Juan Siliezar

BRISTOL, R.I. – As the 2018 school year wound down, a class of interdisciplinary RWU students met one last time with students from the Rhode Island Transition Academy, an on-campus partner, to celebrate the work they'd done over the semester.

One by one, students from the [R.I. Transition Academy at Roger Williams University](#), which is based in Stonewall IV, stood in the GHH classroom and presented slideshows on their experiences at internships and their goals for the future.

During the spring semester, RWU students from a Writing 400 class worked with the Transition Academy students on resumes and these year-end presentations, which the academy students recently presented at their graduation on June 13.

The academy students, ages 18 to 21, are intellectually disabled students who are at what's called a transition age and are preparing to be self-sustaining adults with the experience to land and hold down various kinds of jobs. The Transition Academy works with the students to prepare them for this transition to adulthood.

The academy partnered with the Writing 400 course, Writing for Social Change, not just to help its students, but to tap into the writing and communication skills the RWU students offered.

The work RWU students did with them has proven to be key. They helped Transition Academy students put together strong resumes and articulate personal and professional goals that may help them secure positions in the future. Two academy students have already used their resumes to secure jobs.

RWU students also helped the academy better market itself online, through social media and in print to raise awareness of the work it does. The RWU students created a Facebook page, community maps for Transition Academy students to use, marketing brochures and web pages that the academy has already or will be putting into use.

“You’re really doing something that’s going to stick for a long time,” Carolyn Aspinwall, director for the Center for Special Services at the East Bay Collaborative, said to the RWU students at the year-end celebration. This is a project where students from both institutions benefit off each other, she said.

The East Bay Collaborative is the agency that oversees the Transition Academy.

Nancy Nester, a professor of writing studies, rhetoric and composition, says that reciprocal learning was the ultimate goal for the Writing 400 course.

“Both groups of students found common ground in their aims as they talked about food and movies, internships and video games,” Nester said. “Ultimately, they recognized that they all wanted to contribute to society, form happy relationships and find meaningful employment.”

Students, like Kyle Harvill, found the experience working with the Transition Academy students rewarding since they were able to help the students create resumes that they could actually use. He also said that creating deliverables – such as brochures – for the academy was monumental in getting on-the-job type experience.

“It’s one thing to be in a formal academic environment, but we broke it down to where it was less academic and more: This is what it’s going to be like going out into a job,” Harvill said. “You really feel that every assignment you do is not for a grade, it’s to help out the Transition Academy.”

A Community Engaged Focus

Often with these type of community-engaged projects, like the Writing for Social Change course, students find it’s less about the grade and more about the content and its quality since it’s for an external partner. They also find they must collaborate more with peers in their class to create a clean and cohesive document or documents depending on the project.

For reasons like that, these kinds of community-engaged projects are gaining traction in the Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric and Composition because they show students first-hand how writing works in professional and public settings.

In the fall, for example, Assistant Professor Brian Hendrickson’s technical writing course worked in teams within the course to help the Gloria Gemma Breast Cancer Resource Foundation develop age-appropriate programs for children whose parents have cancer. And in the spring, Assistant Professor Catherine Forsa’s Writing for Business Organizations course worked as a team to create a board of director’s handbook for the Community String Project. In other writing courses, students have written materials that the RWU community can use, such as a travel guide for Bristol or websites on wellness for students living in dorms.

With the writing and communication skills students gain in these types of courses, students often take the knowledge and apply it to their own majors, expanding their abilities within their specific fields.

“In significant ways, writing is central to solving problems,” said John Madritch, the department chair. “In asking students to write for other audiences, we’re laying the groundwork for them to transfer what they learn in their writing classes to other contexts.”

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