

## VCU ACE-IT in Action: An Employment Case Study

Career planning can be defined as a process of self-discovery, short and long-term goal creation, and taking action to achieve those goals. Career planning is not one step or one action, but a multitude of activities that build upon each other. In higher education, career planning is an important part of achieving one's career goals and entering into one's field of choice. This case study highlights how strategic career planning in higher education can lead to successful employment outcomes for students with cognitive disabilities.

### VCU ACE-IT in College

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Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) ACE-IT in College (ACE-IT) is a multi-year postsecondary education certificate program for students with cognitive disabilities. Students audit VCU courses while engaging in career development activities to build their resumes and skill sets and to solidify career goals. The ultimate goal of the program is to help students prepare for and obtain competitive integrated employment that match their interests and skills. This goal is achieved through paid campus employment, interest-driven internships, employer and self-evaluations, goal setting, and individualized employment supports.

### Strategic Planning

Career experiences, like campus employment and internships, are not selected accidentally or randomly. Campus employment during the first semester is selected based upon information gathered from the application, interview, and person-centered planning (PCP) meeting. During the PCP meeting, the student's hopes and dreams, conditions for success, and ways to best support the student are explored. The knowledge, insights, and goals obtained through that meeting are then used to design individualized academic and career opportunities throughout the student's time in the program. After the first semester, other career experiences are selected based upon observations, student and employer interviews, employer and self-evaluations conducted twice a semester, and feedback from the employment support staff. Thoughtful consideration is made for each job placement based upon information discovered throughout the process. It is important to note that all placements are student-led and student-approved.

## Student Profile: Jaden\*

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To capture the career planning journey in the ACE-IT program, the following will highlight the experience of Jaden, a graduate of the ACE-IT program. Jaden entered ACE-IT in the fall semester at age 21. Jaden was a self-determined and confident young man with an intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, and low vision. It was stated in his high school IEP Transition Plan and his ACE-IT application that attending college was a goal he set for himself. He believed that college would take him a step closer to reaching his career goals of working in public safety and law enforcement. While Jaden was resilient and determined, he often needed help in recognizing when an accommodation would be needed and how to ask for help. To be successful, Jaden would need support in obtaining and maintaining employment that would grow his skill set and work experience while attending college. ACE-IT was a perfect match for Jaden to reach his goals of attending college while preparing for a career in public safety and law enforcement.

## Campus Employment

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During Jaden's experience in the program, he held two campus jobs. To determine the best fit for employment during his first semester, the employment staff utilized information from the PCP meeting. During the PCP meeting, Jaden expressed an interest in law enforcement. He shared that in high school he was a member of the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) and had participated in programs for students at local police departments. Learning about this interest led to the development of Jaden's first campus job for the fall semester and spring semester in dorm security. In this role, Jaden was responsible for monitoring guest safety by checking IDs, conducting security walk-throughs, and inputting all guests into the security database. Jaden caught onto his tasks quickly, so supports focused on self-advocacy training, professional interactions with peers and co-workers, staying focused, and proper use of technology.

As he completed his first two semesters in dorm security, Jaden and his employment support staff evaluated his career goals to determine if public safety and law enforcement were still his preferred route. His passion for the field was unwavering and matched his positive work ethic and his ability to "catch on very fast". Moving into Jaden's third semester, employment staff built on an existing relationship with the university chief of police to customize a job position for him. In the fourth semester in the ACE-IT program, Jaden transitioned into a new role with the campus police department. As a student worker, he supported community outreach with special programs and attended shift duties with police officers to learn about the daily routine of officers.

## Internship

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Towards the end of Jaden's third semester, he led a team meeting to review the semester and plan for the next semester. When Jaden talked about his career goals, they remained consistent. Jaden requested to learn more about responding to crisis situations and to work with local city or campus police departments. Jaden's employment support staff customized an internship with the city's animal care and control (ACC) department. At first, Jaden was hesitant to start his internship

with ACC. After learning that he would be working directly with their investigative officers, he became more open to the opportunity. Throughout his internship, Jaden got to go to a few high profile cases where he and another officer were the first responders. His main job responsibilities included creating a donation inventory system, researching neighboring animal care and control offices, and covering at the front desk when needed. In the field, Jaden enjoyed providing families with information and resources to ensure a safe environment and community which enabled him to grow his skills in public safety.

## Outcome

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In his final semester in the program, Jaden led his last team meeting as an ACE-IT student. In this meeting, he talked about how he “got some good experience” in his internship and how he “got on one big case”. He also shared what it was like working with different public safety officers throughout the local community. When he talked about his career goals, he reiterated that he wanted to work with the police. When it came time to develop a job, the police Chief was happy to meet to brainstorm since Jaden and the ACE-IT team had already built a relationship with campus police through his campus job. The Chief asked, “What is your pie in the sky job for Jaden?” His employment team talked about working with the cadets and assisting in disseminating training materials. After deliberation, the Chief emailed the employment team requesting that Jaden have an interview with the officers who oversee the cadets. During the interview, Jaden talked about his experiences with dorm security, campus police, and ACC. At the end of the interview, the officer offered Jaden a job supporting training and community outreach efforts with the campus police department. Jaden continues to succeed in this position and was even awarded the Outstanding Citizen award during his first year of employment.

## Conclusion

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One year later and Jaden is still an employee with the campus police department, making a career for himself in public safety. Jaden came into ACE-IT in College with many strengths, interests, and abilities. Those interests and strengths required hands-on experiences to build his skills, resume, and employability in his field of choice. It was through strategic planning, individualized support, and the discovery process that he received the experiences needed to obtain a career in his field of interest post-graduation.

\*Student's name has been changed for purposes of confidentiality.