

VCU ACE-IT in Action: A Student Case Study

College can be a viable pathway to employment. With the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, higher education has become more accessible to individuals with cognitive disabilities through inclusive postsecondary education programs like Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) ACE-IT in College.

VCU ACE-IT in College

VCU ACE-IT in College (ACE-IT) is a multi-year postsecondary education certificate program for individuals with cognitive disabilities that provides an opportunity to participate in inclusive college learning and career development environments. The ultimate goal of the program is to help students prepare for and obtain interest-based careers in competitive, integrated employment. This goal is achieved through person-centered planning and strategic academic and career planning. This extensive planning process focuses on building knowledge, skills, and experiences that align with career goals. Each student is assigned an academic advisor, job coach, education coaches, and additional support through ACE-IT's employment team. The following case study will demonstrate the effectiveness of this process by looking at ACE-IT graduate Ethan's experience in the program.

Student Profile: Ethan*

At age 19, Ethan entered VCU ACE-IT in College after graduating with an Applied Studies diploma from a local high school. While Ethan had established interests and career goals, he had limited work-based learning opportunities and no paid employment history. In high school, Ethan trained in Taekwondo and was part of an inclusive basketball team. Being a friendly and outgoing student, Ethan could often be found playing video games or a pick-up basketball game with friends. When asked why he wanted to go to college, Ethan responded that he wanted to learn more to get a better job.

Ethan's ACE-IT Experience

Person-Centered Approach with Individualized Supports

Once accepted to ACE-IT, program staff began the process to discover Ethan's strengths, interests, skills and abilities, and how to best support him. This is a crucial step in obtaining successful employment. One way this is accomplished is through a person-centered planning (PCP) meeting. A PCP meeting held at the start of the program gave an opportunity for Ethan, his family, community supports, and program staff to more clearly define employment goals. During this meeting, Ethan expressed that he wanted to become a personal trainer, coach children in basketball, and teach martial arts.

ACE-IT staff used the information from this initial meeting to establish individualized academic and employment supports. These supports helped Ethan set and track goals for his college journey. The PCP meeting is also the first opportunity for the student and his ACE-IT academic advisor to begin exploring potential VCU courses that would best support his employment goals.

Academics

Exploring the student's strengths and interests does not stop at the PCP meeting; in fact, it opens the door for further individualization for each student. At Ethan's PCP meeting, his ACE-IT academic advisor heard Ethan share his health and fitness interests. This advisor wanted to ensure that these interests were reflected in his course selection to allow him opportunities to develop employable skills and to solidify his career pathway.

Ethan's ACE-IT academic advisor and employment team worked together to search for classes and campus opportunities that would foster his career interests. During the search, Health, Physical Education and Exercise Science (HPEX) courses stood out in relation to Ethan's interests. While Ethan completed his first semester with required courses, Ethan's advisor worked with campus partners across the university to obtain an override for him to take a course typically limited to HPEX majors.

Over the course of Ethan's two years in the program, he completed an array of classes that met the requirements for his academic and career plan. Each class was selected with the intent that it would build upon his strengths and better prepare him for the world of work. Some courses included Fitness and Health, Introduction to Innovation and Venture Creation, Introduction to Clinical Laboratory Science, Digital Literacy Presentations, and Exercise Physiology.

Providing the correct support for Ethan was just as vital as selecting the correct courses. Ethan and ACE-IT staff customized how to best support him in the classroom. For Ethan, that included support from education coaches in each of his courses. His coaches helped with tasks like notetaking, organization, and study skills. Throughout his studies, Ethan improved his

independent study skills, academic content knowledge, and soft skills like communication with peers and professors. In one of his courses during his second year, he advocated for greater independence. Because Ethan became able to rely solely on his network of natural supports, his coaches were able to fade completely.

Employment

Early on, Ethan identified the Cary Street Gym as a place of interest, both socially and as a possible jobsite. Ethan's first campus job was a customized position with VCU Recreational (Rec) Sports as a quality check assistant. ACE-IT staff developed this position using the information gleaned from his application, interview process, and PCP meeting. After his first semester, he changed roles within Rec Sports to become a weight room attendant. As Ethan learned about the field and as ACE-IT staff and the Rec Sports team learned more about Ethan, his experiences and responsibilities became more tailored. Ethan thrived with the additional work tasks and truly was absorbed into the Rec Sports family. Management even shared with the employment support that he essentially lived at the gym either playing basketball or exercising when his shift was over. Ethan even had the opportunity to work over the summer at Rec Sports, something offered only to students who perform mostly independent and at a high standard.

Each semester, ACE-IT employment support staff help students set career goals. After his first year, Ethan reiterated his desire to do personal training, coach kids, and work in martial arts. Since the development of clinical knowledge and protocol are necessary in the education of a personal trainer, employment support staff worked with the Kinesiology and Health Sciences Department to customize a position to help Ethan gain clinical experience. In his position as a laboratory assistant, Ethan maintained the inventory system, calibrated exercise bikes, passed out equipment to the class, and assisted students.

In his final semester, Ethan completed an internship at his taekwondo dojo. He tested for and earned his black belt early in the semester, which gave him confidence when instructing students. His tasks included holding target bags and doing combinations next to students; he then progressed to more complex tasks like leading warmups and conducting one-on-one coaching.

While he completed this field experience, Ethan was also enrolled in the ACE-IT internship seminar. ACE-IT staff conducts this course each year for students who are nearing graduation. It covers topics like disclosing a disability, professional communication, career planning, self-advocacy, teamwork, stress management, the job search and interview, and problem solving.

Outcomes: Getting the Job Done

Ethan grew significantly during his two years at VCU. A noticeable improvement was observed in how he became more diligent with his academics. At the start of the program, his ACE-IT advisor had to hold him accountable with studying by sending text messages. These text conversations

shifted as each semester passed to Ethan notifying his advisor of academic achievements or reaching out independently for additional help in a class.

Ethan began to select topics of interest when completing assignments; for example, he gave a presentation about martial arts in his required public speaking course. Ethan went from a “just show up” attitude in the classroom to a student who was prepared to get the job done.

During the job development period between the end of his internship and graduation, Ethan determined that he would rather study Taekwondo than instruct it. His employment experiences helped him learn that he liked working in a gym. With support from ACE-IT employment staff, Ethan interviewed for and was offered a position as a fitness assistant at the University of Richmond. This job lets Ethan blend his passion for fitness and people into a career that is a perfect fit for him. Ethan’s interwoven career and academic experiences helped him fine tune his goals and shaped him into a competitive candidate for working in the career of his choice.

Conclusion

Many pathways to competitive, integrated employment exist for individuals with disabilities. For Ethan, that pathway was through ACE-IT which allowed him to access academics and paid employment aligning with his career interests and goals. Ethan achieved success through intentional, synergistic career and academic planning.

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