

Untapped Source for Remarkable Staff

Like most other businesses, Penn State Health St. Joseph, a non-profit hospital, has always been involved in a variety of rewarding community projects. However, balancing the many requests for participation in worthwhile projects is always a delicate balance to maintain the primary mission of the business.

That balance was one of the concerns I felt when we were asked to become the Berks County host business site for Project SEARCH. *The program is obviously a worthwhile project, but could we afford to devote any time to it?*

To help make that decision, several of our hospital staff met with managers, staff and interns at both Lancaster General Hospital and Penn State Health Milton Hershey Medical Center. Each and every person we talked to demonstrated that yes, the program had many feel-good components, **but it also made good business sense.**

Immediate Success –Glowing Reviews

Department managers from both hospitals commented how drastically their perception of the intern's capability had changed since the program began. "We've had to up our game! We had no idea of the skill level and dedication these interns would bring to the hospital."

Staff and managers also loved the training methods the skills instructors used, teaching interns complex tasks, one layer at a time. Although department staff do play a factor in the everyday function of the intern, the skills instructors were available to re-teach or work through concerns. Many managers mentioned that they now use the Project SEARCH skills instructor's training when bringing on new staff.

They grinned when talking about the *transformation of the culture* of their own units. "Even some of our more cynical staff softened when they saw how eager the students were to learn, and how hard they had worked just to get to that point."

The interns we talked to were self-assured and proud to talk about their roles and how much they had learned. They were confident in their growing skills and were excited to be taking the next step towards independence.

Staff from Human Resource said, "Because the rotations enabled the units to get to know the interns during their training rotations, and they were already doing the jobs, they were eager to hire them."

How the Program Began

Penn State St. Joe's began our inaugural year with Project SEARCH in August of 2018, in conjunction with a Project SEARCH committee with staff from BCIU, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, Goodwill Industries, Berks County Mental Health/Developmental Disabilities Program, and Service Access Management.

Once the 2018-19 school year started, interns spend the first two weeks in the classroom learning employee soft skills: coming in on time, dressing appropriately for work, how to take constructive criticism, getting along with co-workers, advocating for themselves, good manners, and more.

From there, the interns go out to their first eight-week rotation. That first year, they worked in Family Practice, Dental, Food Service, Maintenance, Housekeeping, did clerical tasks for various offices, initiated a daily mail run and helped with the Farmers Market.

In between rotations, they work on their resumes, interviewing, finances, and independence. By our first graduation last spring, all five of the interns had met the goal of competitive employment. Two were hired by the hospital. One as a full time cook, and the other as a full-time unit secretary.

This past school year, we were able to add Pharmacy, which included all the tasks completed by a pharmacy tech, and Physical Therapy.

The interns typically spend their last rotation polishing their resumes, seeking out positions, and interviewing. Unfortunately, the arrival of COVID shut down the program, as well as many businesses. The skills instructor has been working with the interns during the summer to aid in their employment efforts.

Continued Success –Increased Opportunities

For the 2020-21 year, we currently have one intern in Human Resources. He is assisting at the new hire orientation every other Monday, checking ID's for correct information and validity of dates, making copies of the information and returning it into the correct folder. He separates documents, checks items off the checklist, staples documents by group and individual. He is scanning documents to the proper department for processing, such as IT. He is responsible for making new hire folders and is alphabetizing licenses for filing. He is working efficiently and accurately completing assigned tasks.

Another intern is in a durable medical equipment rotation. She is responsible for scanning progress notes and sleep studies into a database for electronic filing. She has learned the system and needs little assistance throughout the day, utilizing her notes and tools to help her trouble shoot issues. She is working very quickly and efficiently at completing this task. She will begin making survey phone calls soon.

A third intern is in the warehouse for this rotation. He has learned the warehouse system for picking ticket lists. He is able to maneuver throughout the warehouse independently to complete pick list orders to be sent out. His supervisor reports his accuracy is great and there have been zero returns or mistakes sent back for error correction at this time. He also uses the cardboard compactor safely and correctly.

Our fourth intern is in the Foundation office. He has assisted by placing items in the golf outing goodie bags, and unpacking items upon the completion of the event. He is assisting with organizing office space, labeling files, and placing correct documents into the folders for filing. He also created a process for various types of greeting cards to be tracked for signatures of the foundation staff. He creates address labels, places on envelopes, and distributes for signatures. Once all signatures are completed, he will complete the mailing process to ensure a timely arrival of cards to recipient.

Lessons Learned

The biggest challenge for us is to help managers and leaders fully understand the capability of the interns.

Several agree to take an intern on for a rotation because they feel like they are obligated to do so. It's typically about a week and a half before they come back to us, amazed at how much the intern is getting done, how pleasant they are to have in their unit, and the change in the staff culture.

It's ironic to find that what may have seemed to be a weakness, may be an asset in a position. An individual that is hyper-focused is the perfect employee for highly detailed tasks. An individual who may not feel comfortable until everything is exactly in the right place is the perfect employee for a position that requires exactness.

As a board member for Pa Volunteer Directors, I've been challenging hospitals, hospice, and long-term care facility directors to seek out Project SEARCH and/or those with disabilities for both volunteer work as well as employment.

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