

Finding the Ability in Disability for High School Students

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High school students are increasingly encouraged to attend college, but for students with disabilities this may seem unattainable. After high school, students must become self-advocates because the law requires less intervention at that level. At Virginia Tech, the High School/High Tech (HSHT) program is working to provide tools, experience and knowledge for students with disabilities so they can succeed in college and beyond. The success of these students can greatly increase the number of qualified people in the growing technology workplace.

High School/High Tech is a nationally recognized program that gives high school students with disabilities an opportunity to expand and explore their interests in math, science, engineering and technology. In Montgomery County, this program includes interactive field trips to the television station and some Virginia Tech Corporate Research Center laboratories. It also provides job shadowing experiences and summer internships for the students. Through this program, students can reap many benefits, including:

- Learning how to apply for jobs
- Learning how to access accommodations, opportunities, etc., on a college campus
- Exposure to career choices in high tech fields
- Work experience in cutting-edge technology environments
- Experience in public speaking and leadership skills
- Eligibility to participate in Youth Leadership Forum
- Raising the number of students who attend and complete college

The students' skills and interactions improved between starting their internships and ending. The two students from HSHT who interned at the Assistive Technologies Lab at Virginia Tech came in with a general knowledge about computers and very little about assistive technologies. Their summer projects required them to learn new software and become more familiar with computer capabilities. Upon beginning, they continually asked what to do during every step of the project they were working on.

By the end of two months, however, the students were able to carry a task to completion without being stepped through the process. Not only did they gain some practical skills like interacting with co-workers and communicating with supervisors, but also some specialized skills. During their internship, the students worked both together and separately receiving the same amount of guidance as any other individual would. During that time, they learned seven software programs, became skilled with audio/visual equipment, and became familiar with half a dozen other pieces of equipment for people with disabilities. Everyday from the start to the end, the students learned more, became more comfortable with their knowledge, and gained a better understanding of their abilities.

High School/High Tech provided these students with much needed encouragement and exposure that is preparing them for the future. Both students now plan to attend college and return to the AT Lab in Summer 2007. The future of High School/High Tech is also looking forward. Next year the program plans to partner with the Science Museum in addition to its current activities like lab tours, hands-on field trips, job shadowing, and summer internships.