

A Better Slice of Life: The Culinary Training Program Creating a Pathway to Employment for Adults With Developmental Disabilities

Abstract

This article provides an overview of an innovative new program offered jointly by Humber College and Christian Horizons. This project, entitled the Culinary Training Program, provides adults with developmental disabilities with the opportunity to learn the skills and knowledge that will lead to employment in the culinary field. The article traces the history of the program, describes its effectiveness and discusses plans for the future. In particular, the program acts as a pathway to post-secondary education and employment for young adults leaving school board settings.

Creating a Pathway to Employment for Adults With Developmental Disabilities

It is challenging to support adults with developmental disabilities to successfully transition to employment after high school graduation. For many young people in Ontario who do not have developmental disabilities, the community college system acts as a pathway between high school and work. This article will describe an innovative program designed to provide this same pathway for young adults with developmental disabilities.

Since 2013, Humber College and Christian Horizons have jointly offered the Culinary Training Program for adults with developmental disabilities. The specific purpose of the program is to prepare its graduates to obtain employment in the culinary industry. This unique program combines the expertise of a post-secondary institution and a developmental services agency to support these individuals to work in their chosen field.

Community Colleges and Students With Developmental Disabilities

In 1965, the Government of Ontario tabled legislation to create Colleges of Applied Arts & Technology as an alternative to universities (Stoll, 1993). The main purpose of the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (referred to as community colleges) was identified as job training to meet the need for skilled labour in Ontario (Drea, 2003). Although they have expanded their mandates, a primary responsibility of community colleges continues to be provision of post-secondary education that will prepare citizens to obtain the job to which

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they aspire. This includes students with a variety of special needs including learning disabilities, physical disabilities, mental health issues and sensory deficits (Brint, 2003; Scott, 2000).

Studies have indicated that there are two significant advantages for individuals with developmental disabilities who attend college. Firstly, attending college appears to have a broad impact on the adult life of the individual with developmental disabilities since attending post-secondary education increases the likelihood of attaining markers of adulthood (Braun, Alissop, & Lollar, 2006). College attendance increases the individual's access to being involved in all aspects of society. In particular, participating in post-secondary education may support the attainment of adult social roles among young adults with childhood impairment (Braun et al., 2006).

Secondly, attending college increases employment rates. Canadian data from the Participation and Activity Limitation Survey shows that post-secondary education has a strong bearing on employment outcomes for youth with disabilities (Hnatuk, 2016). For example, the Alberta Association for Community Living reported that approximately 70% of individuals with developmental disabilities who participated in inclusive post-secondary education had positive employment outcomes (Hnatuk, 2016). Therefore, community colleges have a vital role to play in the overall quality of life of people with developmental disabilities

The Culinary Training Program

Program history. Christian Horizons is a developmental services agency that supports individuals of all ages with developmental disabilities in Ontario, across Canada and throughout the world. Two recently created priorities of the agency are:

1. "To create and promote education and employment opportunities for people with exceptional needs" (Moore & Nugent [presentation], 2016)
2. "To support individuals and families to recognize post-secondary education and real jobs as viable options" (Moore & Nugent [presentation], 2016)

In 2012, Christian Horizons received an Inclusion and Employment Opportunities Fund grant from the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services. With this funding, the agency created the model of the Culinary Training Program.

Christian Horizons approached the Developmental Services Worker Program of the School of Social and Services at Humber College with an invitation for Humber College to partner in this Culinary Training Program. The partnership was formed and expanded to include the School of Hospitality, Recreation and Tourism at Humber College, which administers the culinary courses. The first three courses of the program were each one-week in length. These served as pilot projects, which provided the opportunity to create the structure, fine tune the curriculum, and define organizational roles. In September 2014, the program was expanded to eight months, September to April. Another eight-month course was offered in September 2015 and a new cohort started in September 2016.

In the current model, a one week summer course is offered each year that acts as an intake to the eight month course. This one-week course allows students to experience a brief version of the course and decide if they wish to attend the eight-month course. Humber College produced a film entitled, "A Better Slice of Life," which chronicles the stories of four students in the first eight-month course (Black Cat Advertising Inc., 2015).

Program structure. The structure of the program combines the resources of the agency and the college. Students apply to the program through Developmental Services Ontario, which is the access point to all developmental services in Ontario. The maximum enrolment is 15 participants for each cohort.

The program is offered on a full time basis, five days per week. Day one is employment-related training provided by Christian Horizons staff members on site at Humber College. Students complete Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS), Safe Food Handling, Emergency First Aid and Smart Serve training. The classes for these courses are longer than those that are typically provided in

the community, with repetition and hands on practice included. Therefore, the teaching of the materials is adapted to the needs of the students. Adaptations include taking longer to teach the materials, more practice time, and more visual aids. However, the students are still required to pass certification tests at the end of each course. Other content on day one addresses professional behaviour, resume writing, interacting with colleagues, following instructions from supervisors, and interview skills.

Day two is a class at Humber College's culinary laboratory taught by culinary faculty. These instructors developed a curriculum with learning outcomes that incorporate the fundamental skills that students will need to obtain real jobs in the culinary industry. Thus, students learn about commercial kitchen operations, knife skills, safe use of commercial appliances, salad preparation, sandwich making, baking, and cooking of different entrees. Christian Horizons provides two support members who assist the culinary instructor. Students are expected to meet the same behavioural and culinary skills requirements as students without developmental disabilities in Humber's culinary programs. Students receive a pass/fail evaluation at the end of the course.

Days three, four, and five are placement. Students attend field placement at one location for the duration of the program. Placements are in commercial kitchens such as restaurants, hotels, and hospitals. Christian Horizons staff members obtain placements for the students and provide support at the sites. Students are evaluated by the kitchen manager in their assigned site. Upon graduation, Christian Horizons staff members assist the students to obtain employment and provide employment support.

Program Results

The first eight-month course started with fourteen students, all of whom graduated. Thirteen of these graduates are currently working in culinary jobs. The second eight-month course had thirteen students, all of whom graduated. Twelve of these were employed in culinary positions after graduation. There is a continuing demand for the program with 13 graduates in 2016, 14 in 2017, and 11 in 2018.

The four most positive outcomes of the program are:

1. **Student retention:** The Culinary Program has an extraordinary 100% graduation rate. This can be compared to the 2015-2016 graduation rate of 66.7% for Colleges in Ontario (Government of Ontario, 2016).
2. **Graduate employment:** The graduates of this Program obtain jobs in the culinary industry. The employment rate of 84% across all four years of this program compares very favourably with the 2015-2017 employment rate of 80%-85% for all Ontario students who graduated from a community college (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2018).
3. **Development of professional behaviours:** Students are expected to act as professionals at school and at placement. Throughout the eight-month course, maturity and responsibility grows. Students who have previously struggled with distractibility, disruptiveness, following instructions and reliability learn to be culinary professionals.
4. **Growth in Self Esteem and Confidence:** Being successful in the classroom and at placement has a significant positive impact on each student. Mastering new skills, being able to "do the job" in a professional kitchen, graduating from a college program and obtaining employment appears to contribute to students' sense of accomplishment and pride according to anecdotal comments from family members and the students themselves.

The results of the program are extremely positive and have confirmed the partners' commitment to future plans, as discussed later in this article.

Factors That Contribute to the Effectiveness of the Culinary Training Program

Several aspects of the Culinary Training Program have contributed to its success:

1. The partnership between a community college and a developmental services agency. The program uses the expertise and resources of each organization. It is cost effective

and efficient for organizations to do what they are funded to do and what they do best.

2. The specific vocational focus. There are various options for college programs for students with developmental disabilities. Some programs prioritize social integration and the students attend a variety of academic courses according to their interests. Other programs offer placements in a number of different work settings. The Culinary Training Program was specifically designed for students to obtain culinary jobs. The learning takes place in segregated classes within the broader integrated college environment. However, placement is completely integrated and normalized.
3. The use of professional chefs as instructors. The chefs, who all have worked in the culinary industry as well as being college faculty, know what students need to learn to obtain employment. They also maintain professional expectations and support the students to meet these expectations.
4. The combination of academic learning, culinary laboratories and placement. Students with developmental disabilities have the opportunity to learn information at their own pace, practice skills under the supervision of college chef instructors and then use their skills/knowledge in a real commercial kitchen placement. This maximizes generalization.

What Happens Next? Future Plans for the Culinary Training Program

Christian Horizons and Humber College have established two key priorities for the future of the Program.

Establishing a Permanent Program at Humber for Many Vocations

To this point, the Culinary Training Program has been funded by the grant, which Christian Horizons obtained from the provincial government. This grant ended in May 2017. Therefore, it is crucial to plan for the future, which will include transitioning the program to Humber College.

Humber College is initiating the development of a permanent one-year Employment Certificate for adults with developmental disabilities. While the model of eight months per year, five days per week and combined classroom/laboratory/placement experiences would be retained, students could choose from a range of programs including culinary, landscaping, etc.. Students would pay real fees for the program. Christian Horizons would maintain its involvement by working with students before they enter the program and supporting them on-the-job after graduation.

Working With Younger People With Developmental Disabilities and Their Families

As Humber College launches a permanent Employment Certificate, Christian Horizons will increase its attention on encouraging younger children with developmental disabilities and their families to plan for a future that includes college and employment. Christian Horizons will be meeting with school boards to introduce the model and engage their support in contacting students and families.

In conjunction with Humber College, high school students and their educators will be invited to visit the programs at Humber College. Information evenings will be held for parents and program visits will be arranged for them as well. A two-week summer program at Humber College will be introduced for high school students in which they will become familiar with the College, learn about the programs offered at the college and start to consider future career options.

The Ideal Continuum

Humber College and Christian Horizons have envisioned a continuum across the lifespan, which is described below:

- Parents of very young children with developmental disabilities: Start Registered Educational Savings Plans for these children, introduce responsibilities around the home, and discuss the future.

- Teens with developmental disabilities: Assume increased responsibilities around the home, hold part time jobs, and discuss post-secondary education and jobs at home and at school.
- Older teens: Participate in short term programs at Humber where they will be taught “soft skills” related to employment and they will gain exposure to educational options at the college.
- Graduates from high school: Enrol in the 8-month Employment Certificate at Humber College.
- Graduates from Humber College: Obtain employment in their chosen career.

Thus, the ideal continuum is based on pathways to education and employment.

Conclusions

The Culinary Training Program has the potential to change the provision of post-secondary and employment services for people with developmental disabilities. The model could be used at any community college in partnership with the developmental services agencies in its geographic area. It emphasizes the responsibility that community colleges and the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development have to provide services for citizens with developmental disabilities. It also clarifies potential roles for the developmental services sector with respect to working with younger children and their families to prepare them for college and employment.

The Culinary Training Program answers the question, “How can we support youth with developmental disabilities to successfully transition to adult life?”

Key Messages From This Article

People with disabilities. You have a right to attend community college and take courses that will help you get the job you want.

Professionals. Community colleges and developmental services agencies can work together to provide pathways to post-secondary education and meaningful jobs for people with developmental disabilities.

Policymakers. Employment for adults with developmental disabilities requires policies that mandate cross-sectoral and cross-ministerial cooperation across the life span.

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