FAQs & Guidelines

for Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors who provide services to transition-age students

What is Project SEARCH Indiana?

Modeled on a nationally recognized program developed at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital, Project SEARCH Indiana, with funding from the Indiana Bureau of Rehabilitation Services, provides transition-age students with quality, unpaid internship experiences in preparation for competitive employment. The program is coordinated by the Center on Community Living and Careers at Indiana University’s Indiana Institute for Disability. Through Project SEARCH, students with significant disabilities who are in their last year of high school can experience innovative employment and career development opportunities.

How does a student benefit from Project SEARCH?

While participating in Project SEARCH, a student intern is supported by the employment service provider, the school system, the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (Project SEARCH Liaison), and employees at the host site. Project SEARCH student interns have the opportunity to work in three, varied job rotations regardless of the type of business that serves as their host site. For example, a hospital may offer rotations in clerical, printing, maintenance, dietary, data entry, materials management, retail, etc. In addition, all sites offer student interns total immersion in the workplace, where they have the opportunity to learn a variety of skills in addition to the specific job tasks required of their three rotations. They benefit from continual feedback on worksite behaviors and expectations, customer and coworker interactions, unwritten as well as written rules of the business, how to refine resumes and interviewing skills, and more.
In addition, throughout their Project SEARCH experience, interns are gathering collaborative information that will be included in the portfolio that they obtain upon graduation. These portfolios include letters of recommendation from their internship and Project SEARCH supervisors, photos of on-the-job performance, recognitions received, as well as a detailed resume.

All students leave Project SEARCH with either a job at their Project SEARCH host business, a job with a related business, or with a team to assist them in obtaining employment. The goal of Project SEARCH is competitive employment of 20 or more hours per week. Some students are hired into part-time or full-time positions immediately after their internships. Those interns not hired by their host site at the end of their experience, transition directly into adult services with the provider. Students are able to apply the skills they learned while participating in the program (during both class time and on the different rotations) to a wide variety of jobs. Additionally, Project SEARCH helps students develop a strong work ethic, an understanding of employer expectations for success, and a positive outlook on actively moving forward in their job search.

**What do student interns do every day?**

A typical day for an intern begins with an hour of classroom instruction at the job site, followed by two hours of job site rotation, a half-hour lunch, and another two hours of job site rotation. The day closes with a final 45-minute to an hour of classroom follow-up and instruction.

**What is my role in Project SEARCH?**

As a vocational rehabilitation counselor (VRC) who provides transition services in local high schools, you play a valuable role by helping identify students who may be appropriate for Project SEARCH. Attending case conferences or meeting with students early in their junior or next-to-last year of high school is the best time to discuss Project SEARCH and inform students and parents about the benefits it has to offer. Students must begin to apply for Project SEARCH their junior or next-to-last year, so informing them early allows time for them to ask questions.

You can also help by becoming comfortable with explaining the basics of Project SEARCH, and offering information to those you interact with at school and in the community. Students and families, for instance, need to understand that Project SEARCH requires interns to be completely immersed in the workplace and participate in school activities only as they occur outside the intern work hours. Students will no
longer take classes at their high school. In addition, a student should not consider becoming an intern prior to being certain that it will be his or her exit year from school. All interns are expected to obtain work during or as soon after the Project SEARCH experience as feasible.

Who should be referred to Project SEARCH?

Candidates must be eligible for VR services, should already have met all high school certificate/diploma requirements, and:

- be at least 18 years old
- be in their last year of school
- be willing to work at least 20 hours a week
- be eligible for follow-along supports (ideally)
- be able to use non-school transportation options (i.e., students may use public transportation, or a family member may drive them) during the program, ideally, and, if hired, without exception
- be able to meet the specific hiring requirements of the host business (e.g., drug screens, immunizations, criminal background checks, etc.)

Although the emphasis for recruitment is on candidates who meet most-significant-disability (MSD) eligibility, students who do not meet criteria for MSD could be considered on a case-by-case basis.

What happens after students are referred to Project SEARCH?

When students are referred to Project SEARCH, they go through an application and selection process as well as eligibility determination. Being referred to Project SEARCH does not guarantee acceptance into the program. There are a limited number of internship placements available at each site, determined by the host business, and a site should not exceed more than 12 interns in one school year. Interns who are accepted into the program spend their final year of school at their job site.

Who should I talk with about potential candidates?

When you have identified a student who you feel is appropriate for the program, you will need to contact your Project SEARCH VRC Liaison. Each Project SEARCH site team has a VRC appointed to work with them. This VRC meets regularly (at least monthly)
with the other members of the site team and is involved in the recruitment and selection of the interns.

Note: The Project SEARCH VRC Liaison for the site is not always located in the same office as the other VRCs who might be making referrals to that Project SEARCH site. If you provide services to a high school that participates in Project SEARCH, it is very important to find out who serves as the Project SEARCH VRC Liaison for that site. Your Project SEARCH VRC Liaison will assist you when you make contact regarding a referral and how to best handle the details given the circumstances of the case.

Also note: There may be instances in which you already have age appropriate students on your caseload that you feel are good candidates for the program; in fact, you may already be in the midst of beginning services. These consumers are not restricted from participating in the Project SEARCH program as long as they have not already exited from the school system. In these cases, you will want to first discuss the case with your supervisor and the Project SEARCH VRC Liaison. If the student/consumer is accepted into the program, he or she will transfer to the Project SEARCH VRC Liaison’s caseload. If the student is not selected, however, he or she will remain on your caseload. A specific form has been created to address the situation in which a student is actively working with an employment provider when the decision is made to refer to Project SEARCH.

What if I have other questions?

If at any time you have questions about Project SEARCH, you should contact your Project SEARCH VRC Liaison or your supervisor. For more information about the Project SEARCH model and Project SEARCH Indiana, contact Margaret Gilbride at the Center on Community Living and Careers, 812-855-6508, or mgilbrid@indiana.edu.