

SUCCESS STORY

## HOUSTON COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

### Students Equipped with Essential Job Skills

*Through our experience, people with disabilities are loyal and steady employees.*

– Carole Keeney, Public Information Officer, Houston Community College

#### **Key Lessons Learned**

Enlist the support of internal champions, among line management as well the organization's top management, especially those with personal connection to disability.

Avoid common attitudinal barriers by addressing concerns about productivity, safety, insurance costs, etc. directly and proactively.

Let people with disabilities be a resource in making accommodations for other employees with disabilities.

Continually grow your program by publicizing successes and by serving as a resource to the organization, e.g., assisting with accommodations for current employees who become disabled.

#### **A Large and Diverse Organization**

Since 1991, Houston Community College System (HCC) has been demonstrating that the right training for the right job means successful employment for people with disabilities. Of 2000 students who

have participated in its post-secondary training programs since 1994, over 500 have been placed either in the College's own offices, or in Houston-area businesses.

Houston Community College System was established in 1971 as an open-admission, public institution of higher learning. HCC is the fourth largest community college in the United States, serving over 55,000 students each year. Five area colleges with 4360 employees and an extensive distance education program within the system serve the sprawling Houston area. Plans for addition of a medical college were approved in July, 2004. In addition, HCC students attend classes at almost 80 instructional sites throughout the Houston area.

HCC offers workforce training programs, academic transfer courses, and continuing education to one of the most diverse student bodies in the country. During Fall 2002, the average age of HCC students was 28.5 years, and its student body was 32% Hispanic, 30% Caucasian, 24% African American, 13% Asian, and 1% from other backgrounds.

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#### *Support from the Top Leads to Success*

In 1990, Dr. James Engle, then-President of the College, father of a child with disabilities, and a professional counselor, was approached by a parent of a student with disabilities to establish life skills classes for students with developmental disabilities. By 1991, the College's first program, "Life Skills", which is now called Vocational Advancement and Social Skills Training (VAST), was established.

After the first graduation in May of 1992, HCC began a partnership with the Houston Independent School District to offer a Life Skills Transitional Program for students receiving extended services between ages 18-22. Under this program, transitioning Special Education high-school students attend HCC for their last year, then most go on to VAST or job placement. This program was recognized nationally for its success. Both VAST and HCC/HISD Life Skills are still operating today.

In 1993 a Carl Perkins grant was awarded to begin an Office Skills Training Program (OST) for students with disabilities. This is a three-semester program plus a ten-week internship which trains students to work as office assis-

tants in the community. With the success of VAST and OST, another grant was written and awarded to start another model program, "Capable and Motivated" (C & M). This five-year program offered job-specific training in Culinary, Graphic Printing and Computers to student with disabilities. Many VAST graduates went on to the Culinary and Graphics program, and some OST students went on to the C & M Computer Program. C & M resulted in 60% of the participants becoming employed.

#### *Training Focuses on Needed Job Skills*

The OST program offers customized training to students with disabilities in the office occupations area. This program includes a ten-week internship and provides course work in business communications, human relations, filing, general office procedures, intermediate keyboarding, and PC fundamentals (Word, Excel, Access, Power-Point). A Job Readiness course is offered along with the internship to assist and prepare students with their job search.

Students also participate in special activities: College Day brings area high school students to visit the college; The Eagles Club, an organization for students with disabilities, sponsors an Ability Day

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in October, with all activities focused on the abilities of individuals. Students also participate in the national Disability Mentoring Day, which provides on-the-job mentoring or job shadowing within the college and at business sites in the community.

The staff currently consists of 4 full-time staff: a Program Manager, Instructor/Recruiter, Computer Instructor, and a Secretary assisted by two part-time Teacher Aide/Tutors. Six part-time instructors are also employed each term to teach the needed course load.

#### *Champions Drive Success*

HCC programs owe much to internal champions with both personal and professional interest in people with disabilities, beginning with Dr. Engle in 1991. Sue Moraska, the program's first staff member in 1991, serves as Program Manager. Sue had been a Special Education teacher for 7 years, a Special Olympics volunteer in high school, and has cousins with developmental disabilities.

Carole Keeney, then-Program Director of the Capable and Motivated Programs, also joined the program in 1993. Keeney notes that "top management support was critical" to HCC's success, citing Moraska's leadership, as well as Dr.

Engle's personal and professional insight. Keeney came to the College seeking educational opportunities for her son, who has autism and Tourette's syndrome. In her Master's thesis, she conducted a study of students with and without disabilities, which concluded there is no difference in performance between disabled and non-disabled students. Carole later went on to serve as System Director of Special Populations and now serves as HCC Public Information Officer.

#### *Meeting Internal Challenges*

This strong commitment is often needed to overcome program barriers. Initially, some HCC professors resisted the inclusion of students with disabilities in their academic programs, fearing that this would effectively lower the College's academic standards. Long-term staff was most resistant, while newer staff was more supportive.

Keeney and Moraska addressed these concerns through direct contacts with department chairpersons and through seminars and presentations to departments throughout the college. Today HCC staff and faculty have embraced these special programs and have become more open-minded to ADA issues and how to better serve students with disabilities.

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Among other challenges that program staff address are employers' concerns over impact of employees with disabilities on health insurance costs. A Disability Support Services Office was created in 1992, and now HCC has at least one ADA counselor at each of its five colleges throughout the system. A system ADA counselor, Donna Price, coordinates the ADA Task Force and meets monthly with all of the ADA counselors to coordinate needed services.

These special programs are strongly supported by the HCC administration. The Board of Trustees, the Chancellor, Vice Chancellors, Presidents, and Deans attend numerous activities and events such as Ability Day and VAST graduations.

#### *Providing Accommodations to do the Job*

Job training and placement sometimes requires accommodation, such as purchase of equipment for a secretary without arms and schedule modifications for persons with psychiatric disabilities. Funding for accommodations was an initial barrier, but was overcome by establishment of a program fund to cover these costs. Donna Price and her ADA Task Force meet regularly to keep up

with needed accommodations and new purchases of equipment.

HCC has also hired numerous employees with disabilities such as John London, who serves as the College's Adaptive Equipment Technician. London began as a part-time employee and later became the first full-time adaptive



*John London, HCC's Adaptive Equipment Technician*

equipment technician for the college. He also designed the Disability Support Services Web page. London combines his considerable technical skills and experience with computers and his insight as a person with both visual and hearing limitations to accommodate all students with disabilities at HCC. With London's help, students needing adaptive equipment and software can learn to use these technologies in a relaxed and supportive setting before going on to jobs

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or regular college credit courses, which are at a much faster pace. John was instrumental in creating HCC's first Adaptive Equipment Open Lab for Students with Disabilities.

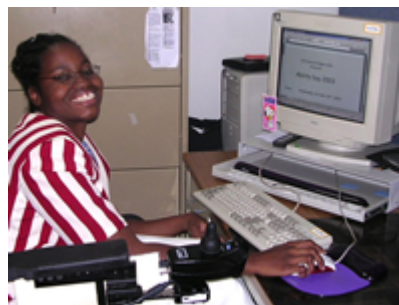
#### *Internships Lead to Competitive Employment*

The Houston area has retained a relatively healthy business climate through the recent economic downturn. This has greatly aided the effectiveness of the College's vocational training and placement programs for students with disabilities. The program has yielded internships and competitive employment in more than 50 local businesses including Cigna Health Care, Memorial Herman Southwest, Courtyard Marriott, Hilton Southwest, Houston Chronicle, local radio station Magic 102 FM, and Office Depot.

Program staff attributes some of their success to the impact of greater incentives offered through The Work Incentive Improvement Act (TWIIA) and collaboration with local One-Stop Career Centers. Numerous graduates of VAST and OST have been employed throughout the college system, in the Mail-Center, Maintenance, Counseling, Interpreter Training, and Financial Aid office. The employment rate of students

with disabilities is equivalent to students who achieve their GED. Ten percent of VAST students go on to regular college remedial and/or certificate programs.

HCC has placed several VAST and OST students with disabilities in its own offices, including Latarsha Brown, who works in the Counseling Office, and Regan Robertson in the Financial Aid Office. Both students just completed their OST internship, and Robertson was hired in 2004 by the Financial Aid Department.



*Latarsha Brown of HCC's  
Counseling Office*

#### *Supporting and Expanding the Program*

What began as a few classes serving 50 students in 1991 has now become two programs serving well over 400 students a year. The VAST and OST programs serve individuals with developmental, learning and physical disabilities func-

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tioning at the kindergarten to 8th grade level. VAST now offers 32 courses per semester in basic academics and life skills, personal/social adjustment, computers, career/vocational, independent living, and job readiness, plus work etiquette, job club, internships, interviewing, resumes, and dress for success. Enrichment classes are also offered in Health and Fitness, Horticulture, Creative Arts and Theatre Arts.

OST has continued to place 75%-100% of its graduates each year in full- or part-time jobs in the business community. VAST, which only began to focus on job readiness and job placement goals in 1995, maintains a 45-50% job placement rate today.

HCC's VAST and OST programs are currently a part of the Corporate Training and Continuing Education Department at HCC-Central. They cost approximately \$200,000 per year. At the inception of the program in 1991, HCC established Moraska's position through their academic budget. Over time, grant partnerships with Houston Independent School District and the Perkins Fund helped cover costs. Since 2000, the programs have been fully-supported by the programs' tuition revenue, contact hour reimbursements and funding from the Texas Department of Assisted and

Rehabilitated Services (DARS) and WorkSource through WIA funds. Over 70% of VAST and OST students receive tuition funding from DARS and WorkSource.

HCC programs were recognized by the US Department of Labor through its first New Freedom Award in 2002. These programs have also been featured several times on the College's own television network: "HCC TV."

All five colleges in the HCC system have ADA counselors and/or Disability Support Services offices to provide accommodations to students with disabilities. HCC-Northwest has now duplicated the VAST program at their Town and Country Campus to better serve students living in the Northwest suburbs of Houston. Other community colleges in Texas have approached HCC to assist with creating similar projects around the state.

#### *A More Accommodating Environment for all Employees*

Keeney, Moraska, and Price remain consistent and continuous resources for faculty and staff throughout the system on issues relating to students with disabilities, the ADA, and reasonable accommodations. Observing the positive approach to disabilities demonstrated in

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this program, other college employees are much more willing to seek help for disabling conditions requiring accommodation, enabling them to remain on the job safely and productively and saving disability costs for the College. The College's Human Resources Department has begun referring accommodation requests to the System ADA counselor and the Disability Support Services Office.

As new HCC facilities are being designed, consideration for experience gained through these programs is being

integrated, including captioning in audio-visual facilities, even exceeding minimum ADA requirements. Carole Keeney points out that the Houston area offers a healthy employment environment. Long-term plans are to add more job development resources to broaden available employment opportunities, including supported employment.

#### *Share Your Story*

**If you have a success story you would like to share, please email us at:**

[earn@earnworks.com](mailto:earn@earnworks.com).

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