

Training for the Future

Nearly one in five Americans experience some form of mental health problem, ranging from occasional depression to more serious conditions (National Summit on Mental Health in the Workplace, 2001). Many of these people are contributing effectively in the workplace, and with additional skills and support, even more people living with serious psychiatric disabilities could join the American workforce. For individuals who spend many years struggling with psychiatric disabilities, meaningful work is described as one of the functional indicators of healing and growth beyond the disability. Meaningful work can also contribute to helping a person recover a personal sense of worth and value.

To create an opportunity for people who experience psychiatric disability to acquire the needed skills and supports to compete in the world of work, the Training for the Future (TFTF) service program at Boston University's Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation was established in 1993. TFTF is an innovative, research-based supported education and supported employment program that was developed as a collaborative effort with IBM Corporation. It is the 53rd disability job-training program sponsored by IBM, and the first of its kind for people with psychiatric disabilities. TFTF is designed to provide participants the opportunity to gain meaningful employment in professional computer careers by teaching industry standard computer and office skills, while simultaneously helping people develop the interpersonal resources to succeed in the workplace.

In today's demanding job market, employers are seeking workers who have adequate training and education linked to competencies and skills that will ensure productivity in multifaceted work environments. Larry Kohn, Director of Development at the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation and founder of the program, reiterates this point, "Employers are looking for personnel who are flexible with their skill sets in addition to being flexible with multitasking in the job setting. Training for the Future prepares workers to perform varied office tasks as well as manage data, handle web design, and relate well in a business setting." Over the past nine years, generous donations from the Lotus Development Corporation, Gillette Incorporated, Houghton Mifflin, Polaroid, Boston University, and other companies along with funding from the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission have supported the development of Training for the Future and enhanced the participation of 120 students.

The TFTF curriculum offers technical, communication, and interpersonal skills development in conjunction with career exploration and planning. Students attend a mix of classes six hours a day/four days per week for nine months to meet the number of

required classes for graduation. A basic course schedule includes an introductory course in each Microsoft Suite application (Word, Excel, Access, and PowerPoint), Internet usage, and direct messaging systems (Eudora, Hotmail, etc.), a recovery workshop, and a class in career assessment. Staff members support student autonomy in selecting classes and internships and work with students individually and in groups to help each person progress to the worker role. Students work on career assessment and exploration to increase their understanding of their preferred working environment as well as evaluate their personal interests, skills, and activities. By matching an individual's abilities and support needs to specific job requirements, it is more likely that the individual will not only be successful, but he or she will also be more likely to enjoy the work and find personal satisfaction in work accomplishments. Using career strategies that are compiled into a workbook, students create resumes and cover letters, explore career directions in various fields, and learn how to conduct interviews.

To evaluate the outcomes of Training for the Future and Recovery Center courses, a newly created recovery-oriented management information system (ROMIS) is being developed to capture both the process that practitioners engage in and the outcomes experienced by students. ROMIS collects information about the particular diagnostic, planning, and intervention activities that have occurred between each practitioner and student capturing the different types and intensities of participation in recovery-oriented psychiatric rehabilitation services. ROMIS is being piloted in both Training for the Future and Recovery Center classes with data collection including individual and class/group process as well as comprehensive demographics and outcome measures. A procedures manual has been developed to ensure that staff members are trained in how to identify the type of rehabilitation and recovery services that they provide. A draft manual describing rehabilitation activities and tasks also has been developed to increase the reliability of the instrument. Training for the Future students are participating in this exciting endeavor to better document the dynamic process of psychiatric rehabilitation and to ascertain which services are most effective.

Over the years, Training for the Future has received commendation from renowned public figures including Tipper Gore, the keynote speaker at the program's fourth graduation ceremony. The former Second Lady and mental health activist commended Training for the Future graduates for their hard work and dedication and credited the efforts of staff for initiating "a truly creative and innovative program." Author Jay Neugeboren acknowledged the importance of Training for the Future in his book *Transforming Madness*:

"I think Training for the Future is an extraordinary program....I sit in the amphitheater at Boston University's Sargent College and I watch and listen to individuals who have

recovered from conditions of mind, feeling, and behavior that are generally considered chronic and incurable, and I look around and wonder: Where is Robert, [Neugeboren's brother who experiences bipolar disorder], and why isn't he here?"

Reflections from Training for the Future Students

Recent Training for the Future Students and Graduates Share Their Perspectives

"Training for the Future helped me tremendously by teaching me skills that I needed for the type of employment I sought. I came away from the program with a fundamental understanding of computers and of the software programs essential to working in an office environment. The TFTF program itself is very challenging and graduation was a proud accomplishment for everyone in my class. TFTF gave me the know-how, the confidence, and a firm foundation for personal growth. I feel great pride in my subsequent achievements. The classes were useful and the instruction was excellent, and my trust in the staff of Training for the Future was well placed. At the conclusion of the course, the staff helped me to obtain an unpaid internship in web design. The job fit my skills and the goals that I had at the time. After the internship, the staff put me in contact with a temporary employment agency that focused on positions in corporate financial settings. Through this effort, I was able to gain experience in order administration, accounts receivables, and financial data management. These experiences enabled me to build my skill base and I have now gained expertise with database programs such as Oracle. This proved to be a gateway to my current job. Before my job interview, I met with two members of Training for the Future staff to get tips on how to interview well and we conducted a mock interview to help me to be prepared. When I thanked him for helping me prepare, one of the staff members, himself a former student, told me 'just be yourself, simple as that.' I was hired for that job and still work there now. I work in a great office environment and I get great satisfaction from work well done. The TFTF teachers were engaging and quick to provide charismatic encouragement. The program provided skills and support that helped me greatly and I can't thank them enough."

Dan Hanify
Purchasing Assistant
Office of Purchasing Services
Boston University

"Training for the Future was tailor made for me. I was not appropriate for a clubhouse setting; but I was not quite ready to return to work. I needed a program that would be a transition, where I could get used to a schedule, reawaken my spirit and challenge my mind, learn new skills, gain confidence in myself, and be in a place where I felt safe when I was symptomatic."

"We learned so much more than just computer skills. We learned what I like to call 'soft skills' such as working on relationship skills, dealing with trust issues, and conflict resolution. We also practiced dressing in work attire and discussed what was appropriate to wear in the work place. Training for the Future provided a safe place if I became symptomatic and I was more able to manage my symptoms with the support of compassionate well-trained people in a safe setting. Training for the Future created an environment that allowed me to be vulnerable enough to deal with issues that could have become obstacles in the workplace....I started to dream again. I feel such a sense of accomplishment and have experienced a real boost in my self-confidence..."

Working With Employers

In a study of employers in various sectors of the business world, Diksa and Rogers (1996) found that employers who had experience in hiring people with disabilities had fewer concerns regarding work performance, administrative burdens, and symptomatology. Likewise, results indicated that employers with an existing policy toward hiring people with disabilities expressed less concern than did employers who did not have an existing policy. Over

the past nine years, Training for the Future staff members have worked diligently with employers in the Boston area to ascertain and meet their employment needs and create optimal internships for TFTF students. Each year employers and supervisors are acknowledged at Training for the Future graduation ceremonies with Employer of the Year and Supervisor of the Year Awards. Employers also participate on a Business Advisory Committee and are invited speakers to share their knowledge and expertise with students on work related issues such as job seeking and job retention. TFTF staff also work closely with employers who have offered internships to program participants and strive to ensure that program graduates are prepared and supported to stay in the workforce. An employer contributed his perspective with the following words:

"As a managing partner at Accenture's Wellesley facility, I have had the chance to offer internships to a number of your program graduates. Two things have impressed me: their skill and the level of support they receive from your professional staff. I have come

to understand psychiatric illness at much deeper level through my involvement with you and your colleagues. I have a far greater appreciation of the immense struggle it is for your students to succeed in school and work settings. They not only have to overcome their own anxiety and symptoms, but also have to deal with society's stigma regarding people with psychiatric illness."

William Flaherty, Director of Purchasing Services at Boston University, recently hired a Training for the Future graduate and noted the following:

"Our department depends on employees who are responsive over the telephone and are able to handle a variety of inquiries related to purchasing orders. Entry-level positions involve data entry, telephone follow-up, and attention to detail. As director of the department, I review a potential employee's credentials and carefully consider how the person conducts the initial interview. I was impressed with the way in which the Training for the Future graduate handled his initial interview, especially his ability to describe his prior work experience and capabilities to meet the requirements of the posted position. I have found him to be a hard worker and excellent employee."

References

Center for Mental Health Services. (2001). Mental Health Employment Summit Fact Sheet.

Diksa, E. & Rogers, E. S. (1996). Employer concerns about hiring people with psychiatric disability: Results of the employer attitude questionnaire. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 40(1), 31-44.

Neugeboren, J. (1999). *Transforming Madness: New lives for people with mental illness*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.