Project SEARCH Alumni Follow-up Study: Combined PS-NIH and PS-MCG 2013-14 Report

Executive Summary

Overview: The purpose of this study was to track long-term employment outcomes of Project SEARCH alumni who attended either National Institutes of Health (NIH) or Montgomery County Government (MCG) Project SEARCH programs between 2010 and 2013. Based on feedback from 29 Project SEARCH alumni, it appears that three quarters are employed for pay, most work between 15-24 hours per week, almost all of these earn more than minimum wage, and just over half receive benefits. Most jobs, paid or volunteer, involve entry level clerical and/or manual tasks. Contact with Project SEARCH staff is less frequent than it was during internships, but for the most part continues to be of high quality. Most alumni are eligible for employment support, and the majority receives it through SEEC. Most alumni continue to live at home with their parents, though almost all have learned to travel independently using public transportation. The majority of alumni are satisfied with their current employment situations, and those who are not are either unemployed or underemployed. A significant majority of parents felt that Project SEARCH did a very good job of preparing alumni for employment, although a few exceptions felt that training and/or support could have been better.

Current Employment Situation: Respondents were asked to describe alumni’s current employment situations, and the vast majority reported working in paid positions. Seventy-six percent were employed for pay with or without the support of a job coach, 7% were employed in a volunteer capacity with or without the support of a job coach, and 17% were unemployed.

Hours Worked Per Week: Although 17% of alumni reported working full-time at their jobs (i.e., 35-40 hours per week), the majority of alumni worked less than this, with most working between 15-24 hours per week.

Income and Benefits: Respondents provided information on hourly wages for 18 alumni. All but one earned more than federal/Maryland minimum wage (or $7.50 per hour). Five earned between $8 and $9.50 per hour; eight earned between $10 and $12.50 per hour; and four earned between $13 and $16 per hour. In terms of benefits (e.g., vacation, sick leave, health insurance), 13 received them and 11 did not.

Length of Employment: Five alumni had been employed at their current job for more than two years, four between one and two years, 13 between six months and a year, and two less than six months.

Place of Employment and Type of Work: Eleven alumni were employed by NIH, eight by MCG, and five by other employers. Alumni most commonly worked at clerical jobs (e.g., scanning, copying, data entry, filing, faxing, delivery), and the remainder worked at physical tasks (e.g., repair, janitorial, laundry, restocking, grocery bagging).

Weekly Job Club Meetings: Eighteen alumni reported attending weekly job club meetings for Project SEARCH post-hires. Of these 67% (n=12) reported that they found these meetings helpful, and 33% (n=6) reported that they did not.

Contact with Project SEARCH Staff: The majority of respondents reported that while alumni were in less frequent contact with Project SEARCH staff, they continued to receive ongoing, high quality support.

Employment Support Services: Twenty-four alumni were eligible for employment support services (e.g., DD services under DDS), and five were not. For those alumni receiving employment support, the majority (n=17) continued to
receive supports through SEEC. A handful reported receiving supports from other providers including Resource Connections Inc. and St. Johns Community Services, and several respondents were unsure who provided employment supports.

SSI/SSDI: Twenty-one alumni were currently receiving SSI/SSDI, and seven were not.

Living Arrangements and Travel: The vast majority of alumni (n=24) were living at home with their parents. The remainder were approximately evenly split between supported living alone or with roommates in a house, apartment or dorm (n=3) and living independently without supports alone or with roommates in a house, apartment or dorm (n=2). Twenty-six alumni travel independently using public transportation and three do not.

Satisfaction with Current Employment Situation: Respondents were asked to rate alumni’s satisfaction with their current employment situations, and 73% or approximately three quarters, were reported to be either “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” (n=21). A significant minority, however (17%) were reported to be either “somewhat dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied.” In terms of satisfaction, the most common theme was alumni’s love of their jobs. Other major themes included belonging to part of a workplace team, pride in work and increased self-esteem, and excellent support from supervisor and/or job coach. In terms of dissatisfaction, major themes included the need for more tasks and/or job hours, and frustration with unemployment and/or lack of pay for volunteer work.

Preparation by Project SEARCH: Respondents were asked how well Project SEARCH prepared alumni for employment, and the majority (or 86%) said either “very well” (n=19) or “moderately well” (n=6). Most commonly, parents expressed appreciation for the opportunity their children had to participate in such an excellent program. Other major themes included high quality job coaching and instructional supports, and improved workplace and job search skills, as well as understanding of things like SSI/SSDI.