Project SEARCH Alumni Follow-up Study

Combined PS-NIH & PS-MCG 2013-14 Report

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Introduction

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. The study was a collaborative effort on the part of Ivymount School and Programs and SEEC, the two organizations that have partnered with NIH and MCG to develop and operate their Project SEARCH programs.1

Data Collection and Analysis

An online survey protocol was developed with extensive input from Ivymount School and Programs, SEEC, NIH and MCG staff that addressed questions about alumni’s current employment status, income, numbers of hours worked, benefits, length of time employed, type of work, satisfaction level, and parental perceptions of how well Project SEARCH prepared interns for employment. Additional questions addressed alumni’s living arrangements and ability to travel independently using public transportation. The surveys consisted of a variety of multiple choice, open-ended, and Likert-type questions (e.g., based on scales such as “very well,” “moderately well,” “not very well,” “poorly”).

The survey was launched in February 2014, and closed in April 2014. Reminders were sent out each week to non-respondents. A total of 29 parents of Project SEARCH alumni completed surveys, 18 from NIH and 11 from MCG. Response rates overall were just over 66%. Response rates varied considerably between the two sites, however, with rates for NIH at only 56%, but at 92% for MCG. Quantitative data were analyzed using Excel, and qualitative data were analyzed thematically, with themes mentioned more than five times being identified as “major” themes, and themes mentioned between two and four times identified as “minor” themes.

Results

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 (n=22) were employed for pay with or without the support of a job coach (see Table 1), 7% (n=2) were employed in a volunteer capacity with or without the support of a job coach, and 17% (n=5) were unemployed.

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1 A third Project SEARCH site was launched by Ivymount School and SEEC at the Smithsonian Institution (SI) in Fall of 2013, but the program was too new to be included in the present alumni follow-up study.
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 (see Table 2).

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), respondents provided information for 24 alumni. Of these, 13 received benefits and 11 did not.

Length of Employment

Respondents provided information on length of employment for 24 alumni. 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

Data on employment site and type of work was provided for 24 alumni. Of these, 11 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. Respondents were asked to elaborate on their responses, and the following minor themes emerged:

- appreciated the opportunity to socialize with peers (n=3)
- benefited from information on office policies and procedures, and review of real life skills such as managing bank accounts and filing taxes (n=2)

An additional six respondents noted that alumni did not attend job club due to scheduling difficulties, because they were unaware of the meetings, or because they chose not to attend.

Contact with Project SEARCH Staff

In response to the question whether there had been any changes in the frequency and/or quality of contact with Project SEARCH staff since alumni graduated from Project SEARCH, 64% (n=14) said “yes,” and 36% (n=8) said “no.” Respondents were asked to elaborate on their responses, and the following two major themes emerged:

- less frequent contact with Project SEARCH staff (n=7)
- ongoing, high quality support from Project SEARCH staff (n=7)

Typical comments included, “Understandably, the frequency of contacts has decreased from the early months of the program.... The quality has remained high, and each of his coaches have been caring and committed to helping him succeed,” and “When he was an intern, it was important to have very frequent contact with his job coach ... He is thriving in his work environment, and we do not need to contact the job coach as frequently .... We have been very pleased with the level of communication his job coaches have provided.” In terms of minor themes, two respondents noted that there was far less frequent communication with parents following graduation from the Project SEARCH program.

Employment Support Services

When asked if alumni were eligible for employment support services (e.g., DD services under DDS), 83% (n=24) replied “yes,” and 17% (n=5) replied “no.”

For those alumni receiving employment support, respondents were asked to identify the name of the adult services program providing support. The majority or 61% continued to receive supports through SEEC (n=17). 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

When asked if alumni were currently receiving SSI/SSDI, 75% (n=21) said “yes,” and 25% (n=7) said “no.”

Living Arrangements
Respondents were asked to describe alumni’s current living arrangements, and the vast majority or 83% (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) (see Table 3).

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<tr>
<th>Table 3 - Current Living Arrangements</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
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<td>Supported living</td>
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<td>With parents</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>With parents</th>
<th>83%</th>
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<tr>
<td>Supported living</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>7%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Travel**

Respondents were asked whether alumni travel independently using public transportation. Ninety percent (n=26) said “yes” and 10% (n=3) said “no.”

**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.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4 - Satisfaction with Current Employment</th>
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<td>Very satisfied</td>
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<td>Not sure</td>
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<td>Somewhat satisfied</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very satisfied</th>
<th>59%</th>
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<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Somewhat satisfied</td>
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<td>Somewhat dissatisfied</td>
<td>7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Very dissatisfied</td>
<td>10%</td>
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</table>

Respondents were asked to elaborate on the reasons for alumni’s satisfaction/dissatisfaction, and several major and minor themes emerged:

In terms of satisfaction, the most common theme was alumni’s love of their jobs (n=11). Typical comments included, “He loves being in the hospital setting, and though he’s learned to curb his need for response to his hellos, he still loves
seeing the nurses and staff on his rounds,” “She adores going to work each day,” and “He loves what he does and is proud to be at NIH serving with the people who help people in need.”

Other major and minor themes relating to alumni’s satisfaction included the following:

- enjoyment of social aspect of work and/or belonging to part of a workplace team (n=6)
- pride in work and increased self-esteem (n=6)
- excellent support from supervisor and/or job coach (n=5)
- good job match and/or genial work environment (n=4)
- opportunities to learn new things (n=4)
- increased independence (n=2)

In terms of dissatisfaction, the following major and minor themes emerged:

- need for more tasks and/or job hours (n=7)
- frustration with unemployment and/or lack of pay for volunteer work (n=5)
- Lack of proper mentoring and/or on-the-job support (n=2)

Significantly, two of the alumni reported to be “very dissatisfied” were unemployed, and the third wanted more work hours. The two alumni reported to be “somewhat dissatisfied” were also frustrated by their lack of hours and/or opportunities for career growth.

**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).

![Table 5 - How Well Prepared by Project SEARCH](Image)

Respondents were asked to elaborate on their responses, and several major and minor themes emerged. Most commonly, parents expressed appreciation for the opportunity their children had to participate in such an excellent program (n=14). Typical comments included: “We are so grateful for everything and to everyone who helped our son and worked with him ... everyone was amazingly awesome,” “Project SEARCH was indispensable,” “Project SEARCH provided a life-altering experience for our daughter. We are blessed to have experienced the expertise of the Project SEARCH and that she had the opportunity to work in such a professional setting,” and “I can’t say enough good things
about Project SEARCH … They met our daughter where she was, discovered what she was capable of, and they helped her to fly. She is continuing to soar. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts.”

In addition, two more major and six minor themes emerged in terms of Project SEARCH program strengths:

- high quality job coaching and instructional supports (n=9)
- improved workplace and job search skills, as well as understanding of things like SSI/SSDI (n=5)
- staff willingness to get to know interns and tailor the program to meet individual needs (n=4)
- increased alumni ability to travel independently (n=3)
- increased alumni independence and self-confidence (n=3)
- excellent job matching (n=3)
- improved workplace-related communication skills (n=2)
- supportive and caring staff (n=2)

Two minor themes emerged in terms of criticisms of Project SEARCH:

- failure on the part of job coaches to provide adequate support (e.g., communication breakdowns, failure to explain reasons for job termination, lack of support in transitioning interns who are not offered permanent jobs at their internship sites (n=4)
- lack of understanding on part of Project SEARCH staff regarding the workplace challenges faced by individuals with disabilities (n=2)

Summary

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.