Project SEARCH
Employer/Supervisor Follow-up Study
Combined PS-NIH & PS-MCG 2013-14 Report

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May, 2014
Introduction

The purpose of this study was to measure employer/supervisor satisfaction with the 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 employers/supervisors’ satisfaction with the quality of interns and permanent employees hired through Project SEARCH, as well as the quality of the services and supports received from Project SEARCH staff. The surveys consisted of a variety of multiple choice, open-ended, and Likert-type questions (i.e., based on scales such as “very satisfied,” “somewhat satisfied,” “neutral,” “somewhat dissatisfied,” and “very dissatisfied”).

The survey was launched in February 2014, and closed in April 2014. Reminders were sent out each week to non-respondents. A total of 34 Project SEARCH employers/supervisors completed surveys, 20 from NIH and 14 from MCG. Response rates overall were low at 52%. Response rates varied considerably between the two sites, however, with rates for NIH at only 44%, but at 70% 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

Project SEARCH Interns

The following section pertains specifically to employers/supervisors’ experiences with Project SEARCH interns.

Total Number of Interns

When asked how many interns employers/supervisors have had through Project SEARCH for one or more 10-week job rotation, responses were as follows:

- 1 intern (n=20)
- 2 interns (n=7)
- 3+ interns (n=7)

Accommodations

When asked for which of the following areas their Project SEARCH interns required accommodations, responses were as follows:

- training for and mastering job routines (n=22)
- addressing communication issues (n=15)
- arranging work/schedule hours (n=13)
- restructuring of job tasks (n=11)
- recording/monitoring schedule/hours (n=10)
- dealing with disruptive behaviors (n=7)

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.
• participating in social activities during work hours (n=6)
• getting along with supervisors/co-workers (n=2)

**Most Significant Benefits**

Employers/supervisors were asked to identify the most significant benefits of having a Project SEARCH intern, and the following four major themes emerged:

• additional assistance with recurring/ongoing office maintenance and routine tasks (n=10)
• opportunity to contribute to the advancement of individuals with disabilities (n=7)
• employing conscientious, hard workers (n=6)
• increased patience/tolerance/acceptance on the part of staff (n=5)

The following three minor themes also emerged:

• interns a pleasure to work with (n=4)
• improved disability awareness on the part of staff (n=3)
• increased diversity in the workplace (n=2)

**Most Significant Challenges**

Employers/supervisors were asked to identify the most significant challenges to workplace success that their Project SEARCH interns encountered, and the following three major themes emerged:

• lack of professionalism and respect for personal/professional boundaries (n=5)
• lack of social interaction skills (n=5)
• difficulty staying focused on tasks (n=5)

The following four minor themes also emerged:

• lack of flexibility and ability to handle disruptions to routines (n=3)
• lack of time management/pacing skills (n=3)
• communication difficulties (n=2)
• lack of independence (n=2)

**Satisfaction with Interns**

Employers/supervisors for the most part reported being “very satisfied” with their Project SEARCH interns (n=22) (see Table 1). Although some reported being only “somewhat satisfied” (n=7) or “neutral” (n=5), none reported being “somewhat dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied.”

![Table 1 - Satisfaction with Project SEARCH Interns](image-url)
When asked to elaborate on their responses, the following three major themes emerged related to reasons for satisfaction with interns:

- eager to learn/highly motivated (n=5)
- quick learners (n=5)
- pleasant to work with (n=5)

Minor themes included:

- accuracy/reliability (n=3)
- hardworking (n=2)
- well-matched and coached (n=2)

In terms of dissatisfaction, two minor themes emerged:

- lack of motivation/inability to complete tasks (n=3)
- difficulty working independently (n=2)

Workplaces No Longer Serving as Project SEARCH Sites

If employer/supervisors’ workplaces were no longer serving as a Project SEARCH internship site, they were asked to explain why, and the following major and minor themes emerged:

- no suitable work available at job site (n=5)
- supervisor/employer no longer working at same job site (n=2)

Permanent Employees Hired Through Project SEARCH

The following section pertains specifically to employers/supervisors’ experiences with permanent employees hired through Project SEARCH.

Total Number of Permanent Employees Hired

Twenty-two of the 34 responding employers/supervisors (or 65%) reported that they had hired a permanent employee through Project SEARCH.

Satisfaction with Permanent Employees

The vast majority of employers/supervisors who had hired a permanent employee through Project SEARCH, reported being “very satisfied” with the employee (n=19) (see Table 2). Only three reported being “somewhat satisfied” (n=1) or “neutral” (n=2), and none reported being “somewhat dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat satisfied</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>9%</td>
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Table 2 - Satisfaction with Permanent Employees Hired Through PS
Employers/supervisors were asked to elaborate on their responses, and in terms of satisfaction, the following major and minor themes emerged:

- excellent work pace and work quality (n=6)
- pleasant to work with (n=3)
- outstanding work ethic (n=3)
- eager/quick learner (n=2)

In terms of dissatisfaction, one minor theme emerged: poor communication/social interaction skills (n=2). Other concerns that were mentioned by no more than one employer/supervisor included poor attention to detail, inability to complete work in a timely manner, and lack of independence.

**Quarterly Supervisor Meetings**

Twelve employers/supervisors who had hired Project SEARCH alumni on a permanent basis reported attending quarterly supervisor meetings. They were asked to rate how helpful these meetings were, and more than half reported that they found the meetings to be “very helpful” (n=8) (see Table 3). Several described the meetings as only “somewhat helpful” (n=3) or “neutral” (n=1), but none found them “somewhat unhelpful” or “very unhelpful.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helpfulness</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very helpful</td>
<td>67%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Somewhat helpful</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>8%</td>
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</table>

**If No Longer Working at Job Site**

Employers/supervisors whose permanent employee hired through Project SEARCH no longer works at their job site were asked to explain why not, but only one employer/supervisor did so. According to this employer/supervisor, the employee was terminated due to poor job fit.

**Project SEARCH Staff**

The following section pertains to employers/supervisors’ experiences with Project SEARCH staff.

**Communication**

Most employers/supervisors were “very satisfied” with communication between Project SEARCH staff and their job sites (n=27), but a significant minority were either “somewhat satisfied” (n=6) or “neutral” (n=1) (see Table 4).

When asked to elaborate on their responses, the following major and minor themes emerged related to satisfaction with Project SEARCH staff:

- responsive and supportive (n=14)
- pleasure to work with (n=3)
In terms of dissatisfaction, one minor theme also emerged: lack of upfront information regarding interns’ support needs (n=3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4 - Satisfaction with Communication with PS Staff</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied: 79%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Somewhat satisfied: 18%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neutral: 3%</td>
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**Most Helpful Supports Received from Project SEARCH Staff**

When asked which supports they received from Project SEARCH staff that they had found helpful, employers/supervisors selected the following:

- regular check-ins (n=27)
- job coach support in training intern to complete work tasks (n=25)
- job coach support in developing a schedule and/or checklist of tasks to be performed (n=25)
- job coach training in appropriate workplace behaviors (e.g., social skills, workplace policy) (n=21)
- trouble-shooting workplace difficulties (n=20)
- opportunities to provide feedback to Project SEARCH staff (e.g., supervisor meetings, evaluation of interns) (n=19)
- job development (i.e., helping job sites identify potential jobs and customize tasks) (n=17)
- staff orientation on specific intern’s characteristics (n=17)
- support in giving disciplinary feedback (n=16)
- communication supports (n=15)
- support for supervisor and/or coworkers on how to work with intern (n=15)
- disability awareness training (n=7)
- supervisor manual (n=5)

**More Services/Supports**

Although a majority of employers/supervisors reported that they were satisfied with the services/supports they were currently receiving, several employers/supervisors identified the following Project SEARCH services/supports they would like to see more of:

- job coaching (n=4)
- assessment of intern’s abilities prior to placement (n=2)
- disability awareness training for worksite staff (n=2)

Additional services/supports that were mentioned by no more than one employer/supervisor included: career and personal development counseling, opportunities to provide post-placement critiques, presentations by interns about themselves, support in disciplining interns, regularly scheduled check-in meetings with interns and job coaches, additional communication devices, and help getting interns hired as permanent employees.
Satisfaction with Supports Received from Project SEARCH Staff

The vast majority of employers/supervisors reported being “very satisfied” with the support they received from Project SEARCH staff (n=29) (see Table 5), although a few reported being either only “somewhat satisfied” (n=3) or “neutral” (n=1). Further, one reported being “very dissatisfied,” although this person qualified their response by adding that they were only very dissatisfied initially, as support from Project SEARCH staff improved over time.

Employers/supervisors were asked to elaborate on their responses, and typical quotes included: “The staff would always answer my concerns and leave me with solutions and insights to handle situations,” “Could not be any better or more responsive – always available and ready to assist in any way,” and “Very professional – always willing to help out.”

In terms of dissatisfaction, two employers/supervisors mentioned that they would have liked more physical presence on the part of the job coach during the internship.

Change in Frequency/Quality of Supports

If the frequency and/or quality of staff supports changed when they hired a permanent employee through Project SEARCH, employers/supervisors were asked to describe these changes. All comments were positive, and typical quotes included: “It changed in the way it was supposed to change. Our intern learned how to be self-sufficient in the workplace and no longer needs the same level of support that was once necessary,” and “A little less frequent, but I think this is appropriate for all involved as they go from being an intern with Project SEARCH to a full-time employee.”

Motivation for Involvement in Project SEARCH

The following section focuses on employers/supervisors’ current and future motivation for involvement in Project SEARCH.

Reasons for Participating in Project SEARCH

Employers/supervisors identified the following main reasons for choosing to participate in Project SEARCH:

- supervisor suggestion that department get involved with this program (n=19)
- increasing workplace diversity (n=14)
- heard about program and thought it sounded interesting (n=7)
- family member/friend with a disability (n=7)
- improving workplace morale (n=7)
• met an intern (n=3)

Willingness to Hire Project SEARCH Interns and/or Employees in Future

When asked if they would consider hiring additional Project SEARCH interns and/or permanent employees in the future, the majority said “yes” (n=29), although a significant minority (n=5) said “no.”

Prior Experience

The following section focuses on employers/supervisors’ prior experience hiring and/or supervising employees with intellectual or learning disabilities.

Prior Experience with Employees with Disabilities

Employers/supervisors were asked if they had experience hiring and/or supervising employees with intellectual or learning disabilities prior to Project SEARCH. Although 62% (n=21) said “no,” a surprisingly high 38% (n=13) said “yes.”

Concerns about Employees with Disabilities

Employers/supervisors were asked to identify what types of concerns they originally had about hiring/supervising an individual with intellectual or learning disabilities, and they selected the following:

• reduced productivity (n=13)
• quality control problems (n=8)
• negative attitudes of coworkers (n=7)
• potential behavior problems or motivational problems (n=6)
• safety concerns (n=6)
• poor customer service skills (n=4)
• lack of support from the Project SEARCH job coach (n=3)

Significantly, 12 employers/supervisors reported that they had not had any concerns about hiring/supervising an individual with intellectual or learning disabilities prior to participation in Project SEARCH.

Addressing Concerns

When asked how well Project SEARCH had addressed employers/supervisors’ original concerns about hiring/supervising an employee with intellectual or learning disabilities, the majority reported that they had done “very well” (n=22), although a significant minority reported that they had only done “somewhat well” (n=7) or “neutral” (n=4) (see Table 6). None felt that Project SEARCH had addressed concerns “somewhat poorly” or “very poorly.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6 - How Well Did PS Address Employers’ Concerns?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very well: 68%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Somewhat well: 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral: 12%</td>
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</table>
Employers/supervisors were asked to elaborate on their responses, and typical comments included: “Although motivation occasionally needs some work, the hire has not demonstrated behavioral problems and has improved productivity in the office,” and “Any and all concerns were addressed immediately.”

Limitations

Results of this study should be interpreted with caution, given the low response rates received, especially from employers/supervisors at NIH. It is not clear how respondents may have differed from those who did not respond.

Summary

In summary, it appears that Project SEARCH employers/supervisors were for the most part very satisfied with their PS interns, and even more likely to be satisfied with their permanent employees hired through PS. The most commonly cited benefits of hiring an intern through PS was additional support for routine office tasks and the opportunity to contribute to the advancement of individuals with disabilities. The majority of PS employers were also very satisfied with PS staff, although a few reported that communication between PS and job sites could have been better. PS employers cited regular check-ins, job coach support in training interns to complete work tasks, and job coach support in developing a schedule or checklist of tasks to be performed as the most helpful supports received through PS. The most common reason for participating in PS was a supervisor suggestion that the department get involved with PS. Although a considerable number of PS employers reported having originally had concerns about hiring someone with an intellectual or learning disability – especially reduced productivity and quality control problems – almost all felt that the PS program adequately addressed these concerns.