

## UI helps students with disabilities find work

Brian Morelli • Iowa City Press-Citizen • March 27, 2009

Sitting behind a computer desk, Peter Fultz designs a badge that war veterans participating in a new golf program will wear.

Office work at the Iowa City Veteran's Affairs Medical Clinic is a little different from the retail jobs the 21-year-old man with cognitive and learning disabilities has held in the past.

The new role was a little unnerving at first, but a cell phone sits by his side just in case, and his supervisor often pops a head in on him.

"I was a little shocked or nervous to begin with, but after a time, time sat still and I was fine," said Fultz, a University of Iowa student.

This internship has been a good experience and could be a showcase for his ultimate career path out of college, he said. The internship is a major component of a new UI two-year certificate program called REACH, which makes on campus college life a reality for students with mental disabilities.

UI launched REACH, or Realizing Educational and Career Hopes, last fall. It is one of only a few programs in the nation that offers such an experience. Fultz, who is from Chicago, is among 18 students enrolled in the inaugural class.

The goal is for students to complete the program, land a job and live independently. The first semester focused on career interests. The second semester has centered on matching students with internships and then getting to work.

Principal Financial Group has pledged \$319,000 to the REACH program to support its efforts to help students with mental disabilities enter the workforce and also potential employers be able to carve out the opportunity.

REACH officials have connected with 10 employers this semester to fulfill the internship requirements. The internships are supposed to open the door to the workforce after graduation and help the students ease through their jitters.

Fultz is somewhat of a model for the rest of class, his instructors said. He has past work experience. Many students do not, so they look up to him.

Fultz works 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. twice a week at the VA. Most students work similar schedules, two to three days a week for five to 10 hours. Next year, students will take on new internships for longer hours and more focused on their long-term interests.

REACH staggered the start dates of the internships beginning in February so an instructor could accompany each student on their first day, including riding the bus with them from the residence hall – Stanley Hall – to the workplace.

Deborah Larson, a career development instructor, helps oversee the internship component of REACH. She or Janis Mendenhall, coordinator of career development for REACH, check in with each student at their worksite once a week for 15 or 20 minutes to help sort out any issues.

Having that line on the resume with work experience is very valuable in meeting with potential employers, Larson said.

“Saying you’ve had the experience at the VA is huge,” Larson said of Fultz experience.

Fultz hopes to parlay this experience into a job at another VA back near home in Chicago or in Michigan, he said.

Larson and Mendenhall said confidence among the students has skyrocketed since the internships began. They talk more with the staff and their peers, and they better about advocating for themselves, Larson said.

“Self-esteem has gone through the roof,” Larson said.

Kirt Sickels, public affairs director at the VA, is Fultz’ supervisor. The internship benefits both sides in this case, he said.

“A lot of folks with the university come in and move on,” Sickels said of other workers. “(Fultz) is here when he is supposed to be, every day. You can count on him and that makes a huge difference.”