

Conference Addresses Career Opportunities for College Students with Disabilities

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A May 2006 Atlanta Journal Constitution story, bares a sobering statistic – “Forty percent of college students with disabilities are unemployed after graduation.” This news flash is not surprising to Alan Muir, Executive Director of the Career Opportunities for College Students with Disabilities at the University of Tennessee, in Knoxville, and reflects why the COSD conference was held this past June in Atlanta, Georgia.

“There are several factors why students with disabilities have a more difficult time finding employment; and part of it is employers are not aware of the students and students need to be willing to do an internship to gain work experience,” he says. “The level of expectation is a problem among students, staff and employers. People don’t think that a student with a disability could actually work.”

Melodi King, a student intern at Merck and Co. Pharmaceuticals, agrees but adds that one of the biggest struggles is just getting the accommodations for classes which later affect employability. “When disabled students are at a disadvantage in the classroom, this is reflected on their GPA and their resume,” notes King, who pursues a chemical engineering degree from the University of Arizona in Tucson. “Students with disabilities are therefore less able to sell themselves on paper to a potential employer.”

To spotlight this issue and help bridge the gap between college students and potential employers, approximately 135 people attended the COSD conference, from June 14-16, held at the Hyatt Regency Atlanta Hotel. The theme of this seventh annual conference was “Maximizing the Talent Pool: Looking Below the Surface.”

“We try to show that there is more if you look a little harder,” comments Muir. The focus of the conference was to bring exposure, experience and expertise to the table. “On the employer side, we want better understanding that there are extremely capable students to hire,” Muir states. “On the university side, we want people to understand that we can provide complete levels of service starting from the time the student arrives to graduation.”

Seeing the disconnect on national college campuses between student career services and student disability offices, Dr. Robert Greenberg, Director of Career Services, and Muir, started COSD 8 years ago. This national association of higher education institutions, popular national corporate employers, government agencies and private sector non-profit organizations focuses on career employment of college graduates with disabilities.

Since that time, several employers have moved progressively to seek out those students. This year’s conference was hosted by Atlanta-based SunTrust Bank, who has specific

recruiters devoted to employing college students with disabilities. Additional companies, such as Exxon Mobile, NASA, Microsoft, JP Morgan Chase, Home Depot, IBM, Lockheed Martin and DiversityInc Magazine, have pledged to actively recruit students with disabilities. These companies realize that students with disabilities are fully capable and can bring value to their business.

In addition to workshops, student intern panels and keynote speakers; a major highlight of the conference was the unveiling of a national career database called the COSD Career Gateway. Launched July 1st, this Job Posting and College Student Resume Database will connect employers with students. “This will be a centralized place and will allow a comfortable environment for students concerned with disclosure,” said Muir. “We already feel there is a huge employer demand, and we have a goal to get over 1,000 students registered.”

For more information on COSD log on to their website at www.cosdonline.org.