
News Releases

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Grant from IU Institute Helps Students with Disabilities Gain Skills at Indiana Colleges

[Indiana University Media Relations Press Release](#) (February 12, 2013)

AIM Academy students Katy Merkel, Rachel Weidenbenner and Caitie Otto discuss healthy salad bar choices at the Bistro at Vincennes University Jasper Campus.

BLOOMINGTON, Ind. -- Ten high school students with intellectual disabilities are working and studying at [Vincennes University Jasper Campus](#) this semester, thanks in part to a grant from Indiana University's Indiana Institute on Disability and Community and its Center on Community Living and Careers.

The institute, a partner in the Indiana Postsecondary Education Coalition, creates programs on Indiana campuses that give students with intellectual disabilities a chance to participate in college life and obtain hands-on work experience before they begin applying for jobs in their communities.

The Advocacy, Independence and Mastery Academy opened this fall for students age 17 to 21 with special needs who are typically in their final year at Dubois County high schools. The academy operates at the Vincennes campus in Jasper, known as VUJC, through a partnership of the Dubois-Spencer-Perry Exceptional Children's Cooperative, Southern Indiana Resource Solutions, VUJC and the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community.

AIM Academy students, like 20-year-old Kaci Schwinghamer from Forest Park High School, divide their time between classroom learning and working various jobs on campus. Schwinghamer is now learning to vacuum floors and clean dining trays at the VUJC Bistro. Other students are inflating basketballs in the gym, shredding documents or cleaning windows.

"Our goal is to get students into off-campus paid work," said Mande Keusch, the cooperative's vocational transition director. Keusch, along with job coaches from Southern Indiana Resource Solutions, is now actively recruiting local businesses that could provide paid work experiences for students in the upcoming semester.

She's also hoping Indiana school corporations will take an interest in the AIM Academy, not only to ultimately provide jobs to AIM students but also to mentor students and help with transportation costs, possibly by providing a scholarship for AIM students.

Southern Indiana Resource Solutions program instructors Jennifer Matheis and Jesse Hubert are responsible for job coaching and teaching AIM students skills they will need to be successful employees, such as completing tasks in a timely manner, arriving on time, using a checking account or just having conversations with friends and co-workers. The overall purpose of the instruction is to help students gain independence, new skills and confidence as they encounter new people, situations and environments.

This is the second Indiana university hoping to build a successful college/work experience program for students with disabilities. The VUJC program is based on a similar one at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, which works with students who are transitioning from Indianapolis Public Schools and other Indianapolis-area school systems.

"Having that campus experience for eight months can really improve the outlook and possibilities for a student with disabilities," said Jean Updike, project coordinator at IU's Center on Community Living and Careers. Updike has been encouraging other Indiana universities to establish postsecondary programs for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Pointing to the national program [ThinkCollege](#), Updike notes that other states have successful programs providing inclusion opportunities to students with disabilities and have found that the programs ultimately benefit not just the participating students, but also faculty and other students on campus. Building upon that, the Indiana Postsecondary Education Coalition has its own [ThinkCollege Indiana](#) website to provide information and resources to students, families and professionals.

"Many of the Indianapolis students in the IUPUI program have wonderful success stories to tell," Updike said. "Several students now have jobs. Some navigate the bus system and travel to the Indy library, their jobs or to meet friends and attend community events. That's a tremendous confidence boost for them. To watch the 'before' and 'after' lives that these students lead is just phenomenal. We're excited that the students at VUJC will now have the chance to tell their own success stories."

The [Center on Community Living and Careers](#) is part of the [Indiana Institute on Disability and Community](#) at Indiana University Bloomington. Both receive support from the [Office of the Vice Provost for Research](#), which is dedicated to supporting ongoing faculty research and creative activity, developing new multidisciplinary initiatives and maximizing the potential of faculty to accomplish path-breaking work.