My Internship Experiences with APSE: The Power of Networking

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In the summer 2011, my parents suggested to me that I may want to consider an internship before I graduated college. They stressed the importance of having work experience in addition to a college degree to prepare me for the job market. Then last summer I had my first internship for the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) in Washington D.C. During that internship, I was given a list of people that I could contact. One of the people I contacted happened to be Laura Owens. She is from Wisconsin, and also the Executive Director of the Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE), headquartered in Rockville, Maryland. Laura is very involved helping people with disabilities gain employment, and it took me a while to make contact with her.

This past spring, Laura Owens was one of the keynote speakers at my Partners and Policymaking group. I knew that I was in the same boat with Laura, because a lot of times it is harder for someone with a disability to gain employment, when disability barriers of employment discrimination may get in the way from getting hired. Then I spoke to Laura regarding an internship in D.C., and luckily was accepted as an intern with APSE.

I had a lot of policy experience from my previous internship where I worked for the National Council on Independent Living before coming to intern with APSE. I arrived in Washington D.C., and attended the APSE conference, and learned what APSE was truly about. According to a document that was sent by Laura Owens, “the Association for Persons Supporting Employment First, is the only national organization with an exclusive focus on integrated employment and career advancement opportunities for individuals with disabilities. APSE is a 3,000+ growing national non-profit membership organization, founded in 1988. Our
members include individuals with disabilities, families, disability professionals, and businesses.” APSE is an organization that fights exclusively for disability employment, when employment is a huge discrimination barrier for people with disabilities.

When advocating against barriers to employment, APSE would like to have more states focusing on Employment First. According to an APSE fact sheet, “Employment First, means that employment in the general workforce should be the first and preferred option for individuals with disabilities receiving assistance from publicly funded systems. Simply put, Employment First means real jobs, real wages.” Having more initiatives, focusing on furthering employment for people with disabilities, will help lower some of the employment discrimination barriers.

The more people who spread the message about Employment First, the more effective it becomes especially when an organization like APSE hosts a national conference.

During the APSE 2012 conference in Arlington, VA, I worked within the organization, to carry out various duties/tasks that needed to be done. I filled up conference bags with materials for the conference attendees. I worked the conference desk, providing assistance to anyone who needed help. I learned quickly that a conference requires lots of behind the scene work. I did not realize just how much work goes to planning a conference. APSE, like any organization, wants their conference attendees to have the best experience that they can. One good experience that some of the conference attendees got to enjoy was, our very first “Day on the Hill event.”

During “The Day on The Hill,” conference participants were able to visit their state legislative representatives in their offices on Capitol Hill. One of the policies APSE advocated for The Day on The Hill was the need to end Sub-Minimum Wage. The Fair Labor Standards Act protects many individuals, to ensure an employee must make at least minimum wage. When you are someone with a disability deemed as being less productive, you may get paid less than
minimum wage according to Section 14c of Fair Labor Standards Act. We advocate that people with disabilities need to get paid at least the national minimum wage rate that is set by the U.S. government. APSE works hard to integrate people with disabilities in the workforce. The major advocacy discussion that APSE uses is if an employee with a disability is not as productive in a certain area of interest/field, then why put him/her in that job. We need to put people with disabilities to do jobs where they excel and succeed.

After our Day on The Hill at the Capitol, we arrived back at the conference. From our experiences at Capitol Hill, many of the presenters, including myself, stressed that inclusion is increased when more people with disabilities are employed. When advocating for inclusion, it feels good when you are in the workforce making positive contributions to society. A major issue with contributing in the workforce is that many people with disabilities receive Social Security, and if they make too much money, they start losing benefits. This may entail losing Social Security income and either losing health care insurance coverage or being forced to pay a higher premium.

I talked with many disability advocates from around the country about the importance of networking and getting to know people. You never know who may end up opening a door for you when it comes to employment opportunities. My presentation was about why “the sky is the limit” no matter what your abilities are. I stressed the importance that you can climb the career of success no matter your abilities. When I received my internship position with APSE, I did not have to submit a job application, nor my resume. I got my internship because I got to meet and talk with Laura Owens. Then by talking with her, she was able to get to know me better. When talking with her, I felt that I believe in the organization’s mission, and I had similar goals when working to increase the employment rate for people with disabilities. Furthermore with
employment, I worked hard on trying to get rid of any employment barriers that may have prevented someone with a disability from receiving a job while working with APSE.

I attended several other presentations at the conference. During the presentations, I learned about many different personal stories of how people with disabilities are seeking employment. One presenter who made wrist bands, worked faster than the other employees who did not have disabilities. Another presenter talked about technology, using an iPad. An iPad helps someone with a disability to communicate with other people when that person has communication barriers. The iPad is also useful when a person wants to create a schedule of a list of things to do as the use of technology is on the rise. Still another presenter spoke about the Social Security system on a policy level. The presenter expressed strong interest in changes that needed to be made to the Social Security Administration, so that it could better serve people with disabilities. Throughout the conference someone had a story to share, by talking and communicating with other people. The more we can work together and exchange ideas at conferences, the more we can get done by returning home to improve the lives of people with disabilities, by helping them to obtain employment.

At the APSE office after the conference, I realized that even after it is over that there are still lots of behind the scene work. My first tasks, (which took me two full weeks) were to tally the conference presentation and rating sheets. I also had to document the comments made by the attendees regarding the presenters at the conference and topics presented. Sometimes it got tricky tallying peoples’ ratings because I can easily lose focus on what I’m doing when it is a long process to record. Sometimes I dealt with illegible handwriting. When I got used to the repetition, I was able to finish up that task a lot quicker.
I enjoyed working on other activities such as attending a hearing of the Convention on Rights for People with Disabilities (CRPD). They seek to work internationally to increase the rights for people with disabilities. One troubling issue too many disability advocates, is that many countries have signed a treaty making a pledge where they will try to make their own country disability accessible, and the Congress of the United States has not yet signed. What if the treaty has some contradicting policies that go against some of the laws that the United States government has already put in place for people with disabilities? What if another country does something wrong for people with disabilities? How will the U.S. react to that as they are bound by the treaty? Would the U.S. need to sign a treaty when Congress already fights for many accessibility issues? It was argued through many disability advocates that at least signing a treaty would show that the United States is on board with the other countries when working to make things more accessible and spreading more human rights for people with disabilities.

Many people showed up for the Congressional hearing about the CRPD treaty, which suggests that if we all stand together, we can get a lot of things done. People who attended the treaty event saw some of the congressional members, and talked about their feelings, whether they were for or against the treaty. When you hear arguments from both sides of the aisle, at least it is easier to understand where someone is coming from, even if you disagree with him or her.

After I attended the hearing about the CRPD Treaty, I worked on combining and upgrading documents. From time to time, information in a document may need to be updated, as history changes when new things take place in society. I ended up working on revising and editing the Legislative Handbook which provides a document which provided information about how to contact legislators. If you want to meet with your legislator, you may not know what to
say, but this guide helps to train disability advocates on how to contact their legislators and staff. Looking over other peoples’ documents provided me with the learning experience of seeing various different styles in writing a document. Also the information I read may become useful for the future papers that I write to help inspire people with disabilities.

I enjoyed my internship. I was able to work on improving my grammatical skills, and also increased my knowledge and understanding for people with disabilities. Unfortunately, there are policies that less than perfect for people with disabilities, but eventually if some of these policies change through our advocacy we could have a better tomorrow, and a greater path to equality.

When it comes to the path of employment equality for people with disabilities, I thank Laura Owens, for making things possible for me to intern at APSE. I enjoy working in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan area, the heart of heavy duty politics. Meanwhile, I also enjoy advocating for people with disabilities. My life was hard enough growing up with Autism, with hurdles throughout my childhood, just as they continue to be for myself and others now. If I can help make life easier in the next decade for the next group of people with disabilities, I will. My major goal is that people with disabilities for future generations to come, must not have to jump through all the hurdles that I did. If I learned one thing, it is about who you know and through all my networks, I was fortunate to meet Laura and have her in my life as a valuable contact, and also as a great friend. When I finish up school in another year or so, I am really going to need people like her to help me find full time employment, as it’s hard enough for even a “normal” person without a disability to find a job, at least in this economy.

Moreover, I enjoyed working with the APSE national staff. They did a great job teaching me about how to do all the behind scene work when you are working for a not for profit
organization. It was a privilege to work alongside such wonderful, knowledgeable people and be accepted as part of the team! I am grateful for all of them working with me so that I am allowed to pursue my passions and dreams even further. In addition, they helped me to become a better writer. The experiences I learned thru my internship thru APSE offered me many memories that I will cherish. I could not have been as successful at my internship if it were not for Laura and her amazing staff members. I could not have done it without them. It is because of dedication from people that truly care about others, that I can continue to climb!

Work Cited

