

Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired – LEAP

Program Overview

The LEAP Program provides students and young adults, ages 14-24, who are blind or visually impaired the opportunity to gain skills needed to be independent, confident, and productive with the outcome of increased employability. LEAP is a workforce development program which delivers Pre-Employment Transitional Services. The program provides work based learning experiences, internships and workshops so that participants are more competitive entering the workforce.

LEAP includes an intensive summer residential program which includes living in community housing and focuses on independent life skills, leadership, working with others, and achieving success working a full week.

LEAP also facilitates year-round Professional Growth Retreats focused on work based readiness training for students to develop social and independent living skills. Themes of past retreats have included: Technology and Transportation; Workplace Relationships; Food and Finance; The Interview; The Resume; Networking, and more.

To understand the power and impact of LEAP, check out our video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVrG1ESEsjM>.

Staff and Partners

The Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI) works with LEAP students to prepare and recruit them for the LEAP Program. DBVI staff also works to make sure that students have access to resources and accommodations required to be successful. This staff includes four Counselors, an Assistive Technology Trainer, and the Director of DBVI.

ReSOURCE, a nonprofit organization in Burlington, is contracted by DAIL to provide LEAP Pre-Employment Transitional services to students who are blind or visually impaired. ReSOURCE works closely with DBVI and the Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (VABVI) to identify and recruit students to the program. ReSOURCE also partners closely with VABVI to provide specialized services to students including Orientation and Mobility, Vision Rehabilitation Therapy, and Instruction in Assistive Technology.

Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired – LEAP

ReSOURCE works with many partners in the community to provide work experiences and Internship sites to our students. These partners include The Overlook Café, Sara Holbrook Community Center, The Vermont Youth Conservation Corps, Salvation Farms, Burlington City Arts, WBTV Radio Station, Mt. Mansfield Media, Sangha Yoga Studio, King Street Youth, and more.

Recent Developments and Accomplishments

A significant accomplishment for the LEAP Program has been creating opportunities for students to engage in leadership development amongst their peers and their communities. During our summer residential program, we place returning students to become Student Leaders or Crew Leader Assistants. These leaders serve as significant role models for younger students, while the experience provides the leaders with a sense of confidence, accomplishment and responsibility.

One student wrote a thank you letter to her mentor:

“You are the best mentor I could ask for. That's because you didn't just teach me skills like food preparation and cane travel. You taught me that blindness is not a tragedy, not something to be ashamed of or covered up. Just by being your cheerful, caring, funny, and independent self, you showed me that I don't have to live by the low expectations that others set for me.”

Future Directions

The LEAP Program is currently developing its **Technology Builds Brighter Futures Program**. Our society is becoming increasingly reliant on technology. It is essential that individuals with blindness or visual impairments have access to this space as digital citizens. LEAP is committed to empowering our students to access the tools they need to become as capable and competitive as their sighted peers.

The **Technology Builds Brighter Futures** classes will encourage students to collaborate on creative projects using assistive technology. In 2018, each student will participate in an assistive technology class that encompasses a digital culture of sharing, collaboration, and creativity.

Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired – LEAP

Results

From 2014 to 2017 the LEAP program has grown from 18 to 61 participants. The number of training hours has increased from 15,000 in 2014 to 27,000 in 2017. This has resulted in significant skill gains for students in employment and independent living skills. Each student receives a report of their progress which is shared with school teams, teachers of the visually impaired, and DBVI counselors. Students learn to identify their strengths and areas of vocational interest. In 2017, 75% of the interns had enrolled in college programs, and the remaining 25% are working with their DBVI counselors to match their skills to a career path.

Success story:

In summer 2017, LEAP worked with a student with a visual impairment who had been struggling in school and desperately needed a positive experience. She has significant anxiety and depression and lives in a challenging home environment. She was encouraged to attend LEAP, but it became clear that the residential aspect would be overwhelming.

LEAP created a two day a week work experience for her at a store. She was provided with a job coach and a driver. She had a successful summer and learned to use special magnification to complete work tasks. She engaged with customers and fellow employees, was enthusiastic about her job tasks, and connected with her job coach. In her LEAP Report, her job coach wrote that by the end of the summer she needed very few prompts to complete the tasks and it no longer seemed necessary for her to have a job coach.

She completed her summer work experience with a new sense of confidence and success. She brought this confidence back to school with her, and her teachers remarked about a significant positive change in her attitude. She shared with her school team that she had a mentor in her supervisor at the store. Because of this success, LEAP is continuing to provide her with a work experience at the store throughout the school year.

Quotes from LEAP Students:

“My favorite part of working at ReSOURCE was communicating and interacting with my other coworkers and customers because working with people effectively improved communication and customer service skills. I'll be more prepared for possible employment opportunities in the future.”

-LEAP Corps Member, ReSOURCE Household Goods Store

Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired – LEAP

“I learned that there will always be changes that you aren't expecting at a workplace, and that it is good to ask questions and talk about them.”

-LEAP Intern, Burlington City Arts

“I am most proud of being able to run a broadcast on my own. I once thought that being blind was going to make radio impossible for me pursue, but this experience helped me understand my abilities.”

-LEAP Intern, WBTV Radio Station

“I am proud of the fact that I was able to get to and from work independently, that I did my job well, and that I felt more confident as time went on.”

-LEAP Intern, Overlook Café