

# Aces for Adult Connections in Education

by Allan Manley

In these days of cynicism and sarcasm it is a pleasant surprise when you discover something that not only benefits society but is sincerely altruistic. It has been my pleasure to discover more about the "Adult Connection in Education" program (ACE) that is run through the university. The ACE program is designed to help adults with intellectual disabilities to attend university and develop a number of facets in their life, it has been on campus for some time and has had some great success.

The facts (Stealing from ACE literature):

The ACE program is a four year program. Students attend 12 months of the year which include two semesters of university classes and activities in addition to a semester of on-the-job training or a volunteer placement. Participants must take a minimum of one class per semester but may take up to three, these courses have a modified curriculum however they still get to enjoy the pleasures of writing exams and submitting papers. In the spring participants have job placements based upon their interests and aptitudes.

While the literature provided at student services is very interesting I felt that to really understand the benefits of the program I needed to speak with a few people involved in the ACE program itself. The first individual I encountered was ACE participant Brook Champion. Brook is in her first year of the program and is very happy with it so far. Of the various components, Brook speaks highly of the physical aspect of the program as her favorite, and

that she can often be found on the track at the gym. In addition she is looking forward her summer placement which she hopes will be outdoors and working with kids.

After speaking with Brook I had the pleasure of talking with Melissa MacDonald an ACE peer. Melissa has been with the ACE program for two years and has helped several participants. Melissa has a unique perspective on the program as her sister Madonna is a graduate of the ACE program. It was Madonna's experience in the program that encouraged Melissa to become a peer. What this means to Melissa is that she spends about two hours a week with two different ACE participants. The benefits according to Melissa are not one sided as she relates that while studying with her ACE students she is also learning.

Melissa explains it best saying "I have seen some amazing things, not only through my own experience, but through my sisters experience as well. It is a positive experience not only for the participant but for the families as well. You get to see the joy the students experience in learning and interacting with the university community." Melissa also enlightened me to the practical applications of the ACE program.

The only downside to the program appears to be the lack of public funding available to participants. The cost for a year of the program is \$1830, which breaks down to \$610 a semester. Participants are not eligible for a student loan despite the diploma at the end of the four years, and although \$1830 is still a relatively low cost for 12 months of education, it must exclude some

people.

Madonna, upon completion of the ACE program now works with the Prince Edward Island Heart and Stroke Foundation three days a week. Doing clerical work in an office is beneficial in offering Madonna a place of employment, providing the Foundation a loyal and hardworking employee and also helps integrate Madonna into public life. Madonna is an example of the success the ACE program has attained.

While looking up information on the ACE program in the Student Services center I received some great help from Jeni Mutch, Senior Program facilitator of the ACE program. She was personable and

helped leave the impression that the ACE program is a quality component of UPEI. On the whole I was impressed by how much the program accomplishes on different levels and with such a minimal amount of peer support required. After researching this article it is very hard for me to justify not becoming a peer. I highly recommend that any returning student contact Jeni Mutch (jmutch@upei.ca) at the student center to help in this wonderful program. In general I am skeptical of the success of non-profit programs, however, in this case I was very happy to find my cynicism misplaced.



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