

# Promising Practice Brief



Promising Practice Briefs are produced by the Association of University Centers on Disabilities through the UCEDD Resource Center (URC) in conjunction with its network members.

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## Trainee Voices: Increasing and Supporting Trainee Diversity

### What makes a Promising Practice?

Promising Practice Briefs are intended to highlight projects of excellence with a goal of offering a program model from which University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs) can glean inspiration for new activities and promising practices to augment their own work. A promising UCEDD practice may be a research or evaluation project, policy analysis, data assessment, outreach initiative, or awareness effort. It may provide a direct service or a supported opportunity to people with a developmental disability, indirect support to family and community caregivers, or interdisciplinary training for students, fellows, professionals, and policymakers. It may involve leadership development, community work, or clinical practice.

While Promising Practices are unique in their workings, they offer replicable components for diverse settings and share these common characteristics:

- It reaches the population of focus
- It is an effort characterized by quality
- Its impact is measurable
- It addresses the aspirations of individuals
- It is respectful in its methods
- It safeguards those it intends to benefit

### Introduction

The look and feel of the U.S. is ever changing. The U.S. Census Bureau (2012) projects a majority minority shift in the population by 2060. Many organizations and programs, including the Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD), are focusing on creating effective practices that embrace inclusion and this inevitable increase in diversity. AUCD is a national organization that supports and promotes a network of university-based interdisciplinary programs advancing policy and practice for and with individuals with developmental and other disabilities. Located in every U.S. state and territory, these programs include 67 University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs) and 43 Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND) programs. UCEDD and LEND programs prepare trainees from diverse disciplines to assume leadership roles in their respective

fields. In light of the demographic shift, AUCD remains committed to effectively supporting an increasing number of diverse student trainees who participate in the UCEDD or LEND interdisciplinary training programs and move on to serving their communities.

AUCD acknowledges the great value that comes with embracing diversity and inclusion, especially in higher education programs. The knowledge, experience, and viewpoints of students from diverse backgrounds and cultures enriches teaching, research, the learning environment, and inevitably the real world workforce. AUCD and the disability community benefit from students of diverse backgrounds because a major need in the disability service system is racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity in the workforce (Clark, T., & Majewski, K., 2013).

Optimal health and access to health care still eludes millions of Americans, particularly disability communities experiencing disparities due to intersecting variables such as their race or ethnicity (Graham, G., & Spengler, R., 2009; HHS Advisory Committee on Minority Health, 2011). According to Rowland et al. (2014), the population of people with disabilities is quite diverse and a growing body of research has found that people with disabilities experience lower health status, and an excess burden of disease relative to the general U.S. population. As the diversity of the nation increases, these disparities are also bound to expand. Therefore, as efforts are explored to address the current and expanding disparities, attaining a diverse workforce is an essential strategy because research shows minority patients are more likely to choose health care professionals from their own ethnic groups or who speak the same language (HHS Advisory Committee on Minority Health, 2009).

## **Trainee Interview Summary**

In recent years, the AUCD network has focused on identifying and deploying efforts and strategies to successfully achieve more diverse and inclusive interdisciplinary training programs. To better evaluate current strategies and further understand how to successfully support trainee diversity, AUCD staff solicited information and insight from a variety of trainees from different generations, backgrounds, and cultures who have completed UCEDD or LEND training programs across the country. Interviews with former trainees were conducted over the phone in a semi-structured format. A set of specific questions were prepared, however, the conversation remained flexible to new topics based on the responses received.

During the interviews, trainees were asked a series of questions pertaining to: 1) their prior knowledge of the UCEDD or LEND interdisciplinary training program; 2) their reasons for choosing the training program; 3) their experience in the training program; 4) evidence of diversity within their UCEDD or LEND training program's cohort; 5) thoughts on the priority to increase diversity within the disability field and the AUCD network; 6) challenges experienced during their traineeship; 7) suggestions on recruitment to reach diverse or underrepresented populations; and 8) suggestions on UCEDD or LEND support to retain diverse trainees.

The feedback and responses from the trainee interviews are reflected in summary below. For the purpose of this summary, UCEDD and LEND programs will be referred to as Centers hereafter.

### ***Awareness of Center or Training Program***

The trainees interviewed reported having no prior knowledge of their Center or interdisciplinary training program before becoming a trainee. A few trainees reported having knowledge of the Center's administrative home, but not the Center or training program itself. After learning about the trainee opportunity from a mentor, Center employee, or their field placement office, they researched the Center and/or training program's website in order to further determine whether it was an adequate fit for their goals. They were all surprised to discover that their training programs of interest fulfilled so much of what they were looking for to enhance their academic studies.

One interviewee stated she was excited about the idea of doing any internship as a part of her college requirement because she knew it would open her eyes to a new breadth of knowledge and could increase post-graduation and career opportunities. However, when she was provided an approved listing of field placement options she initially overlooked the Center's training program because she wanted to be calculative; she wanted go somewhere she had heard about, somewhere trusted that was not only a good fit for her major but also had connections to her field. Her lack of awareness of the Center almost prevented her from further exploring the training program. She expressed gratitude that she was led to the Center by a friend and for the resulting partnerships she has developed.

A majority of the interviewed trainees were so pleased with their training program that they have remained connected even after completing their traineeship. Unfortunately, they do not feel connected enough to the AUCD network at large to recommend someone to another Center or training program, but they have and would recommend others to the Center where they served as a trainee.

### ***Experience in the Training Program***

The experiences varied for each trainee based on their Center, role within the training program, and student academic level. Overall they all felt positive about their training program, so much so that some rated their experience as invaluable. One trainee recalled her first day when the Center hosted an introductory session and featured a panel of faculty members which included women from ethnic backgrounds similar to her own. That moment brought this trainee assurance she had selected the right training program. She went on to say it was disheartening to see that having individuals from underrepresented populations in faculty positions did not hold true for other institutions.

Trainees not working in a diverse environment felt the lack of diversity in their Center and/or training program created difficulties. Some thought their environment was predominantly women or predominantly Caucasian and though their environments were not hostile, cultural gaps were evident. It was just “not as comfortable as it could have been if there were other people who looked like you, came from similar backgrounds or shared similar experiences; I felt a little isolated,” explained one trainee.

Trainees thrived most in situations where they felt they were genuinely cared for. One trainee shared an example of how she would often refer to herself as “just an intern,” which would be corrected by faculty members who would encourage her to recognize that her role is more than that of “just an intern;” she was about to graduate and be out in the field working as a professional and had attained a valuable level of knowledge and experience. Trainees expressed appreciation that they were not simply “making copies or getting coffee,” but felt their roles were important. They valued having assigned tasks and projects which made them feel they were making a difference and had a purpose within their Center.

Having adequate support was also essential for most trainees. The youngest trainee interviewed reported that faculty and staff in her Center were very nice, but admitted it was discouraging that she was the only young person because it sometimes left her feeling a little inferior. She went on to say her feelings were not brought on by anyone’s reaction to her personally but this was simply her first time in an office environment. She felt she needed more support and feedback. On the other hand, trainees who felt well supported reported their training program taught them unexpected and advanced skills such as team development, team leadership, decision making in a work setting, prioritizing, taking lead in projects, time management, and communication.

### ***AUCD Network Priority to Increase Trainee Diversity***

Trainees interviewed were excited by the prospect of increased trainee diversity in the network and the disability field, and hope it is something that continues to move forward. They felt it was an absolute need for the AUCD network, which serves many underrepresented populations. One trainee shared that diversity “brings knowledge of how to better serve diverse populations that may not necessarily come from academic studies/research; anecdotal information may be just as valuable in certain situations.”

Some trainees felt fortunate that the direct learning environment of their training program consisted of great leaders and people in higher positions from diverse backgrounds who served as models and/or support systems. They reported the importance of seeing diversity at those levels because it serves as proof that diversity is not just a box to check off for the organization. “If you can see somebody in the position where you want to be who looks like you or is from a similar background, it’s encouraging to you,” explained one trainee. Some trainees, especially those involved in specialized training programs, reported that a program with little diversity is not a factor if other options aren’t available, but it is a factor if there are other training options. Trainees reported they “would definitely choose the more diverse program if there were options,” however, if their placement was not diverse they “would have been ok, but would not have looked forward to it each day.”

Though little diversity was reported within the cohorts or at the leadership level, trainees felt cultural competency was embedded in their training program and the Center’s mission based on the population served by the Center.

To the extent possible, trainees felt faculty and staff empathized and sympathized with individuals from diverse or underrepresented populations. Some trainees recalled training modules on cultural competence being a required piece of their training. Another trainee recalled her Center director being very proactive and including trainees in Center meetings and University meetings regarding student diversity. They were not only asked to accompany him but also to speak. Trainees expressed that as the network adopts strategies to increase diversity, it is important to also encourage trainees to find their voice, speak up, and have input into conversations. One trainee stated that trainees need to be “empowered to elevate their status within the network or within their situations.” The trainee further explained that having diversity at the table is not the end, but only a starting point because trainees also need to know “they have something to say, it matters, and they are being heard.”

An interviewed male trainee characterized his experience as the only male and only person from a diverse background in his training program as alienating at times. In fact, he recalled talking with the security guard on his breaks, the only other person from a diverse background on staff. He said that in situations such as his, a person can sometimes feel weary if they are constantly being reminded they are a minority and representing their entire race/ethnicity. He expressed the importance of establishing “diverse cohorts that can be bonded together and move through the ranks together; having one at a time, you are just an alien in that world.” He went on to say that with a diverse learning and work environment, trainees can experience trials together, have an outlet or support system, and people to possibly look to or talk to when they are facing difficulty. This is especially helpful when experiencing an adverse situation, as was witnessed by an interviewed trainee. The trainee said after she completed her training program, a fellow trainee who she recruited left the training program due to an overwhelming number of personal reasons including lack of support from fellow trainees. Unfortunately the remaining cohort was not diverse, and the interviewed trainee felt that played a part in her fellow trainee leaving the training program.

Ultimately, diversity adds significant value to any program. It brings “another thought process to innovation,” said one trainee. It is not only impactful on faculty and trainees but also on the populations trainees will serve once they enter the workforce. Trainees who had the opportunity to engage in clinical work or work directly with individuals from underserved populations and/or persons with disabilities and their families felt families were comforted to see another individual who was in a position to help them who looked like them and could relate to them. A trainee recalled being stopped by patients in the hallways just to say “it’s good to see you here.” Trainees feel a diverse network and workforce instills a “sense of community trust” and more willingness for community members to invest in the network, the affiliated university, and other university programs. Trainees feel the network’s pursuit to increase trainee diversity shows that the network is “vested in all people in the community.”

## **Suggestions for Increasing and Supporting Trainee Diversity**

Responses from the trainee interviews highlight the great benefits of the interdisciplinary training programs available through the AUCD network, however, most of those interviewed had no prior knowledge of the Center or training program prior to becoming a trainee. They commented that the biggest barrier to increasing trainee diversity is the lack of awareness of the opportunities that exist within the network. They went on to provide several suggestions for increasing and supporting trainee diversity.

Recruitment strategies include:

- Be transparent with efforts to increase trainee diversity
- Encourage current trainees to reach out and recruit new trainees
- Include trainees from diverse backgrounds in Center or university efforts to increase diversity
- Improve marketing strategies to inform students from underrepresented populations about the training programs
- Develop recruitment materials that clearly outline how participation in the network can lead to serving the community and underrepresented populations
- Connect with high school guidance counselors and provide marketing materials or training information in a format they can easily disseminate
- Include high school students as a target audience in recruitment efforts
- Participate in high school career days and diversity career fairs to let students know about the career opportunities and highlight how the careers give back and affect the community

- Tap into high school organizations, especially those geared toward underrepresented students
- Identify summer programs and other informational programs geared toward first-generation and underrepresented college students
- Participate in community events geared toward underrepresented populations
- Connect with religious institutions to identify strategies for reaching their youth
- Develop pipelines with field placement offices and colleges to serve as an approved internship sites
- Participate in graduate school fairs to highlight the Center and training program
- Reach out to postsecondary student organizations to discuss goals and show them how the network can benefit them in their goals regardless of their career aspirations
- Participate in regional conferences hosted or attended by diverse postsecondary organizations

A student climate that supports retention should:

- Empower trainees to sit at the table and share their voices
- Provide examples or models of other individuals from underrepresented populations in faculty or leadership positions
- Provide creative financial support to offset training program and personal expenses
- Empower students to elevate their status within the network and within their situation
- Provide a mentor or staff support to provide regular feedback, guidance, and support
- Offer structured or non-structured opportunities to learn life and leadership skills such as financial planning, communication, team development, team leadership, decision making in a work setting, prioritizing, taking the lead in projects, and time management

## For more Information

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