



VCU

From ITAC "Seed" Grant to a Blooming Garden: How We Continue to Grow Family Member and PWD LEND Trainees:



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Background

Virginia LEND (Va-LEND) has consistently involved family members of children with disabilities in numerous project activities – for example, family mentorship, guest speakers, and as family discipline trainees and faculty. As with many LEND programs, we often call upon the same individuals time after time to be a mentoring family as well as join faculty in making presentations within courses and community events.

In 2014 a decision was made to change the limited role of family members in Va-LEND activities and to set the stage for future increased involvement of people with disabilities within all aspects of the project. To address the first issue, goals were set to find a systematic way of recruiting new family members and to provide opportunities for increased participation for families in all of our project activities. Va-LEND knew that the first step must be to obtain first-hand information from these families as to what the barriers and issues are that prevent increased participation. With a small ITAC grant entitled, **Recruiting Family Mentors to Become LEND Trainees and Future Faculty Members**, Va-LEND explored issues that would increase participation with families, and used this information to set a framework for revising recruitment procedures as well as planning for future involvement by family members and people with disabilities.



From Medium-Term to Long-Term Trainee

A major outcome of the ITAC grant was the creation of a medium term track for trainees who may not have an undergraduate degree and who are family members or individuals with disabilities who want to pursue LEND training. **Alexis Nichols** was 1 of 4 trainees selected



for the first cohort of medium-term trainees in 2016. She completed over 100 hours of training in 2017 before deciding to apply to become a long-term trainee. Alexis is currently on her way to completing over 300 hours of didactic and clinical training with a focus on disability leadership. One of her projects has been spearheading the design of an accessible playground slide that children in wheelchairs can use. There have been a number of pipe-line training events for pre-professionals that Alexis has presented with Va-LEND faculty that have resulted in Alexis taking over the planned agenda because she wants medical personnel to truly understand choice and self-determination in decision making.

Purpose

The purpose of this poster is to present what Va-LEND has accomplished during the past 3+ years with increasing participation of family members and people with disabilities participation as trainees, faculty and staff. members. This will be done by highlighting the success of 4 of the "seeds" that we planted in our garden who blossomed.



Findings

The most important factor that Va-LEND has discovered which increases participation by family members and people with disabilities in LEND training is:

FLEXIBILITY

- ...In **TIME** needed for completion of training
- ...In **PARTICIPATION** in training sessions
- ...In **ACCESS** to training materials

From LEND Trainee To FME Coordinator

Kate Flinn assumed the role of FME Coordinator in July 2018 after a competitive search to replace the long standing previous coordinator. After completing Va-LEND in 2016, Kate founded and continues to coordinate a group of advocates, educators, and school administrators that focus on the transition needs of students who are intellectually average or **gifted but who are also on the Autism Spectrum**.



What sets Kate apart is that she never left Va-LEND after completing her LEND training. Prior to being hired as a staff person at Va-LEND, she volunteered in many different capacities – assisting with training, at FME events, and whenever a family voice was needed in program planning.

From LEND Trainee to National Leader and Beyond



Even before **Zipporah Levi-Shackelford** completed Va-LEND as a trainee, she was appointed to the Board of AUCD as the trainee representative. Zipporah's skills in distance education is what led to her being hired as the staff person responsible for the creation and modification of on-line training modules that allowed Va-LEND to have a state-wide presence beginning in 2016.

At the same time, Zipporah began collaborating with our People with Disabilities faculty member, Jack Brandt, to create the new medium term trainee category which has been in effect for the past 2 years. Today, Zipporah serves as a Family Discipline faculty member, the distance education coordinator, and the co-coordinator of Va-LEND's medium-term trainee training.

From LEND Trainee to Co-Director of Training

Three years after finishing LEND training, **Meera Mehtaji**, earned her Ph.D. in Special Education and joined the faculty of the School of Education as a Collateral Faculty Member. This was in the Fall of 2017 she was hired as the Co-Director of Training at Va-LEND. Meera brings into her position at Va-LEND, years of personal experience in determining the most effective accommodations needed by individuals with disabilities, especially those with learning disabilities. In her position at Va-LEND, Meera serves as the liaison with the VCU School of Education for the academic components of the curriculum/



Implications for the Future

Va-LEND continues to recruit family members into both Long-Term and Medium-Term training cohorts. We now have a non-academic category of Long-Term trainees that will allow additional individuals with disabilities to be trainees without having undergraduate degrees. Balancing academic rigor of the curriculum with FLEXIBILITY for all trainees remains a challenge, but it is a challenge that faculty and staff embrace to ensure that Va-LEND is as inclusive as a training program as possible.