

Next Steps at Vanderbilt University:
Refining relationships with employers



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Contents

Acknowledgement and Dedication	4
Executive Summary.....	5
Introduction to Next Steps at Vanderbilt University.....	9
Organizational Background.....	11
Overview of Employment.....	11
Overview of Admissions Process.....	12
Overview of Curriculum.....	12
Inclusive Programs in the United States.....	14
Next Steps at Vanderbilt.....	14
Problem of Practice	15
Internal vs. External Internships.....	16
Literature Review.....	16
Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage.....	17
Demographics of the Issue.....	18
Enhancements to the Workforce.....	19
Laws that Protect Individuals with Disability.....	19
Current Employment Data.....	20
Impact of Post-Secondary Inclusion Programs.....	20
Employer Misconceptions.....	22
Conceptual Framework.....	23
Supports Needed for Supervisors of Neurodiverse Employees.....	24
Challenges in the Process.....	25
Addressing the Challenges.....	25
Research Questions.....	27
Project Design	28
Methods.....	29
Participants.....	29
Results.....	30
Key Findings.....	30
Survey Results.....	30
Analysis of Benefits.....	32
Culture Change.....	35
Supervisors Assets for Support.....	36

Challenges to Host Next Steps Interns.....	38
Advice to Future Supervisors.....	40
Supervisor Testimony for Continuing with Next Steps.....	42
Recommendations.....	43
Discussion.....	47
Limitations.....	48
Future Directions.....	48
References.....	49
Appendices	58
A: Email sent to Next Steps at VU Supervisors.....	58
B: Survey sent to Next Steps at VU Supervisors.....	59
C: List of organizations who responded.....	60
D: Next Steps Promotional Flyer.....	61
E: Next Steps Promotional Brochure.....	62

Acknowledgement and Dedication

“Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much.”

- Helen Keller.

In this dedication, I take the time to celebrate the community of support that has pushed this work forward. As you learn about the Next Steps Vanderbilt University program, my hope is that your takeaway is to value community, lead with gratitude, and treat people with kindness.

I give gratitude to my grandmother, Nannie Mae Nevils, who sold World Book in the 1950's door-to-door. She taught me the value of empathy, personal relationships, grit, and perseverance.

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This is more than a dedication, it is an acknowledgement that success is only accomplished in a community of collaboration, love, feedback, and honesty. Life is best if you lead it with gratitude. I am thankful for everyone who helped me get here, and to you, the reader.

Executive Summary

The goal of this study is to refine relationships with employers who seek to include a more neurodiverse workforce and to provide an improved support framework for the student experience. Next Steps at Vanderbilt University (VU) was launched in 2010 for college-aged students with intellectual disabilities with the goal of providing an inclusive higher education experience. Initially, Next Steps was a two-year certificate program and attracted few applicants. The program has grown to a cohort of 30 students and lengthened to a four-year program. To date, it has graduated 50 students and is one of roughly 300 inclusive education programs of this type in the United States. Through VU's experiential curriculum, Next Steps offers a unique inclusive and transformational post-secondary experience. The outcomes this program seeks are emotional, intellectual, and social in ways that best prepare these students for long-term success in their careers and to live fully independent lives.

A unique component of the Next Steps experience is its focus on improving each students' employability through engagement in full time internships. The goal of the internship is to guide students as they define and refine their career goals, develop transferable job skills, and expand their employment opportunities. Students are placed as interns within organizations with support and counseling provided by a job coach with ongoing (sometimes daily) discussions with supervisors for semester-long improvement-oriented experiences. Through 2020, approximately 60 supervisors had served in the Next Steps program. This study surveyed that pool of supervisors to address the following research questions:

Q1: What are the benefits for supervisors in hosting Next Steps VU interns?

Q2: What are the challenges for supervisors in hosting Next Steps VU interns?

Q3: What supports do Next Steps VU supervisors report receiving? What supports were most helpful?

The body of research that informs this study includes studies that document the challenges encountered by the neurodiverse community when entering the workforce. This study also reviewed research into successful interventions and methodologies that break down barriers often found in practice related to the employment of neurodiverse workers. Annabi & Lebovitz's (2018) Organizational Interventions Mitigating Individual Barriers (OIMIB) conceptual framework provides a holistic picture of the relevant factors (challenges, supports, benefits) that affect individuals with intellectual disabilities to guide neurodiverse employment programs within organizations.

The data collection and analysis took place in three phases. Phase one included an on-line survey of VU supervisors through Next Steps. Phase two focused on the review and analysis of the supports, challenges, and benefits of hosting interns with intellectual disabilities as reported by the VU site supervisors. Phase three connected the findings of the study to recommendations for solving the problem of practice: improving relationships and building new partnerships for Next Steps interns.

Q1: Four core findings of the study related to the benefits of hosting interns from the neurodiverse community were:

1. Creation of a neurodiverse workforce improves overall organization performance. Supervisors reported a significant benefit was having an extra set of hands to support office tasks.
2. Hiring neurodiverse talent increases inclusion and awareness, which in turn benefits the interns, staff and community. Supervisors reported a key benefit was understanding how neurodiverse customers engage with products and services.
3. The organizations that hire neurodiverse interns reported a return on investment. Supervisors reported their neurodiverse interns educated staff, increased patience and tolerance, and they were grateful for the opportunity to collaborate on projects that invited important conversations about ability and inclusion.
4. The supervisors reported a key benefit was the opportunity to contribute to the advancement and skill development of the neurodiverse.

Q2: Four core findings of the study related to the challenges of hosting interns from the neurodiverse community were:

1. Productivity slowed when there were communication gaps, confusion around expectations, and a lack of understanding the interests of the neurodiverse interns.
2. Time constraints negatively affected the depth of project work available for the interns.
3. Awareness of, and attention to, consistency in the amount of supervision and independence that each intern required presented an operational challenge.
4. The need to work remotely due to COVID-19 protocols added significant obstacles to the support of interns.

Q3: The study revealed the following supports as the most helpful in supporting neurodiverse interns:

1. Meeting the student and job coach prior to the start of the internship to learn about them: what their interests are and how they would work together in the best way.
2. Robust planning and scheduling tools for managing time on site, including review of weekly goals, daily checklists served to increase the productivity of the interns.
3. Weekly meetings between the supervisor, intern, and job coach established and strengthened rapport, and created spaces for exchanges of feedback.
4. The relationship between the intern and the job coach was helpful for reinforcing appropriate workplace behaviors and ongoing engagement of the intern's strengths to the work.

These findings inform the following four recommendations for building and refining new relationships with employers. The recommendations will serve as the foundation for curriculum changes that support job coaches, supervisor onboarding/engagement workshops, and the development of marketing tools to share with the organizations who will support Next Steps interns in the future.

Recommendation #1. Partner with employers to understand and accommodate the individual needs of neurodivergent interns.

Many of the supervisor responses indicated ongoing challenges related to a lack of understanding of the interns' interests. One supervisor reported, "The biggest challenges I have found are trying to find where exactly an intern's interests lay. I always want the work that I do with interns to reflect them and their individuality, but it can be hard to get them to express themselves in that way when the concepts and tools we work with are often so new to them." In response, the Next Steps Career Development team should host onboarding workshops for supervisors. The content will acknowledge hiring interns in the neurodiverse community is not a one-size-fits-all approach and provide resources for identifying their gifts.

One supervisor reported, "I would love to be connected to other organizations that have hired interns in order to hear their stories and advice, as having an intern on staff is one of our goals." Another commented, "The Next Steps students work best with a daily consistent routine and checklists. Providing activities in which the Next Steps students can be as independent as possible and as successful as possible is ideal." The onboarding workshops will provide a space to build community and share tools that enhance relationships with neurodiverse interns, including weekly check in and time blocking resources. These workshops will provide spaces to role play conversations that identify strengths, challenges, and methods for troubleshooting how to best supervise neurodiverse employees. Supervisors will exit the workshop with a request to meet with the interns prior to arrival with the goal of learning about their personal interests. In addition, they will be provided with prep tools that aid in building learning goals and a weekly tasks list that benefit both the intern and organization.

Recommendation #2. Promote the ongoing supervisor coaching that is available for the duration of the internship.

Next Steps at VU supervisors reported, "I wish I would have had a better understanding of the program and more guidance to prepare to host an intern. We figured it out, but as we went along" and another shared, "people don't always know what they can ask of the interns." The Next Steps Career Development team should acknowledge that supervisors may not always feel comfortable about how to communicate with neurodiverse interns even after the student has been on site for a few weeks. Encourage the supervisors to access the ongoing support including job coaches, learning plans, video training, and discussion forums the Next Steps Career Development provides to enhance open supervisor and intern communication. Most importantly, ask the supervisors to build a positive working relationship with the intern's job coach and lean on them for support. Emphasize how important this is at the start of the internship, when the job coach accompanies the intern for the full work shift.

One supervisor reported, "Allow yourself to be open and honest with Next Steps staff and the intern's job coach. Don't worry that you'll misspeak. A huge benefit of participating is to learn the language and rethink your approach to working with others. Pay careful attention to how the staff/job coaches interact with the interns and use that as your guide as well." As the semester progresses, the goal is to create an increased level of independence for the intern where the job coach spends less time on site. The Next Steps Career Development team should emphasize how important it is to develop a relationship with the job coach at the start of the

internship. They should share that building this relationship will increase the likelihood of a positive learning experience for the organization and intern.

Recommendation #3. Train the employers who host neurodivergent interns how to reevaluate recruitment and hiring practices.

The Next Steps Career Development team should recommend supervisors create evaluation processes that allow for the expression of the interns strengths. Relying on traditional job interviews often creates bias against individuals with atypical manners of interaction (Krzeminska et al, 2019). The Next Steps Career Development team should train supervisors to use creative recruitment formats including pre-interviews, informal conversations, online interest assessments and onsite problem-solving team activities using an online blog platform. The Next Steps Career Development team should provide examples of these tools in information materials shared with employers who inquire about hosting Next Steps interns.

Recommendation #4. Encourage the employers to adopt advocacy and policy changes that reward hiring neurodiverse interns.

Supervisors reported the most common reason they hosted Next Steps interns was because they have a family or friend with an intellectual disability. The Next Steps Career Development team should encourage supervisors to share written and audio recorded stories about neurodivergent friends and family members to highlight the gifts they bring to the workplace. The stories can be used in the onboarding workshops and testimonials in marketing materials to aid in creating a culture that advocates for the neurodiverse. The second most common reason supervisors reported hosting interns was because they heard about the program through a friend or referral. The Next Steps Career Development team should use their preexisting supervisor relationships in a deliberate way to ask for referrals, create marketing materials, online blog posts, and a community discussion forum. These action steps will shift the focus to a societal advocacy movement for the neurodiverse that will not only refine current relationships but also grow new partnerships.

Introduction to Next Steps at Vanderbilt University

In August of 2017 the first Next Steps at VU intern, Darko Osman, walked into the doors of the Mayborn Vanderbilt University HOD Capstone Internship suite with his job coach, Chelsea Janda. Darko spent three months with the HOD Capstone office and had a direct impact making organizational processes more efficient. His work went far beyond the assigned tasks of his internship (preparing mock interview materials, improving the aesthetics of marketing tools, and checking the mail at the VU Commons post office). Darko's presence created a culture shift. The Capstone team saw the HOD department through the lens of Darko, our first neurodiverse colleague.

Figure 1

Darko Osman, Next Steps at VU student with his job coach, Chelsea Janda (Fall 2017)



Darko's greatest strength is his memory. He can remember names, copy codes, stories, and organizational systems. His presence in the HOD office transformed the way we now partner with individuals who have visual barriers. Darko helped our team think creatively about how to arrange events that support individuals who are neurodivergent. In the photo below, Darko is featured with the head of talent management at Emma, Inc., an email marketing software solutions firm, for his mock interview. In the interview, Darko shared that his lifelong goal was

to “graduate from college, live as independently as possible, have a big house, and get an awesome job, maybe in government.”

Figure 2

Darko Osman with Christine McPherson, head of talent at Emma, Inc.



Darko’s semester-long internship provided insight into the benefits, challenges, and supports needed for creating a neurodiverse workforce. This study reveals the stories of Next Steps supervisors who have also opened their doors to hosting individuals from the neurodiverse community. The goal of this study is to refine relationships with employers who seek to include a more neurodiverse workforce and to provide support for the students and their experiences. Individuals with neurodiversity are more discriminated against than individuals with physical disability in the hiring process. The findings of this capstone project may serve to address the misconceptions surrounding employment challenges and have the potential for mitigation.

Organizational Background

In 2010, Next Steps at VU launched as the first inclusive education program at a top-15 university with a mission to promote excellence in scholarship, education, and inclusion and equity for college-aged students 18-26 who have a documented intellectual disability (Next Steps Vanderbilt Annual Report, 2021). Next Steps VU, one of 306 inclusive education programs in the country, has grown to become a nationally recognized higher education program that supports college students with intellectual disability (ID) or the neurodiverse to immerse themselves in an undergraduate college experience. Participants engage in activities that include coursework, extracurricular roles, service projects, recreation, internship, and employment (Next Steps Annual Report, 2021). Next Steps VU is committed to providing college-age students with ID an inclusive and transformational postsecondary education in academics, social and career development, and independent living, while honoring equality, compassion, and excellence in all endeavors (Next Steps at Vanderbilt, 2021). To date, the program has graduated fifty students (Next Steps Annual Report, 2021).

Overview of Employment

Individuals with ID and neurodivergent gifts now have more opportunities than ever to spend time thinking about the work they wish to pursue. Beyond deciding what they want to do, they also have the opportunity to live and work independently. Inclusive higher education programs such as Next Steps at VU provide the support to individuals with ID in becoming contributing members of society. Preparing graduates for meaningful employment is a vital part of the Next Steps VU program. The 2021 Next Steps VU Annual Report shared that of their fifty alumni, eleven are living independently and have a 91% employment rate for all graduates, as compared to a 20% nationwide rate for individuals with ID (Next Steps Annual Report, 2021).

A key part of employment success is the opportunities each student has to explore interests and experiment with career options, vocational training, and on-and off-campus internships. Since its launch in 2010, Next Steps at VU graduates have partnered with organizations such as Best Buy, the Gardner School, the Country Music Hall of Fame, the Nashville Convention and Visitors Corp, and the Tennessee Performing Arts Center. At the completion of their four-year program, the graduates receive a Career and Community Studies certificate granted by Vanderbilt University and have at least two internship experiences to leverage as they transition into full-time employment. Beyond the certificate, the impact can be found in the relationships the students build with peer mentors, faculty advisors and most notably internship supervisors. The quotes below share highlights from two supervisors who have hosted Next Steps VU students as interns.

Lori Ward with the Tennessee Performing Arts: *“As a nonprofit organization, we have a mission to serve all people. Having a person with a disability in the workplace is an extension of that philosophy. To be an inclusive workplace is an admirable goal for my company, or for any company.”* (Vanderbilt University, 2016, 3:40)

Andrea Arnold with the Nashville Convention Center and Visitors Corporation: *“It’s just been helpful for 90 members of our staff. They have learned a level of acceptance and ability that we could not have taught in any other format.”* (Vanderbilt University, 2016, 0:22)

Overview of Admission Process

Approximately ten students are admitted each fall academic semester. Next Steps VU applicants must have a documented intellectual disability, be between the ages of 18 and 26, have successfully completed high school, and received one of the four Tennessee diplomas. They must also receive or be eligible for services under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, express a strong desire to attend college, and be excited to become better prepared for the world of work and a future career.

Overview of Curriculum

Once admitted into the program, students enroll in one to two courses each semester for a total of four years. To date, 185 different university courses have been taken by students enrolled in the Next Steps VU program. The courses encompass all disciplines at Vanderbilt. Next Steps students are invited to participate in class discussion and create modified learning plans for meeting assignment deadlines.

Campus life is also one of the highlights of the Next Steps VU inclusion model. Students participate in on campus organizations, service groups, and orientation activities. According to the 2021 Next Steps VU Annual Report, students participated in over twenty organizations on campus. Undergraduate students in these organizations volunteer approximately one hour each week to support Next Steps VU students in various ways. For example, the Vanderbilt Chabad Jewish Student Group created a detailed plan of support for including a Next Step VU student in all activities. The Vanderbilt Theater organization worked with a Next Steps VU student to learn how to operate lighting for several recent plays. The Vanderbilt Student Volunteers for Science (VSVS) members have led science lessons for local middle school students alongside Next Steps VU participants (Next Steps Annual Report, 2021).

Career development is built into the Next Steps VU experience in which students participate in job shadowing or an internship. They participate in an off or on campus job to develop life skills in preparation for employment and independent living upon graduation. The outcomes of these experiences provide proof that this component advances the Next Steps VU goal to better prepare their students for the world of work and a future career. The combination of these efforts have had a significant impact on the graduates. As shared above, The Next Steps VU 2021 Annual Report documents 50 alumni, 11 are living independently with a 91%

employment rate upon graduation, compared to a 20% nationwide rate for people with intellectual disabilities (Next Steps Annual Report, 2021).

Inclusive education programs across the U.S.

Next Steps VU is one of 306 inclusive education programs nationwide and one of just six in Tennessee. The six programs in Tennessee work together to accomplish a Tennessee Inclusive Higher Education Alliance (TN IHE Alliance) to increase the higher education opportunities for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in our state and beyond. The Tennessee IHE Alliance is made up of more than 20 state and local agencies, self-advocates and family members, representatives from colleges and universities in Tennessee, and business owners. Representatives from each of Tennessee's inclusive higher education programs serve as core members of the alliance. As a program operating under the TN IHE Alliance, Next Steps VU helps to reach a goal of spreading awareness of college opportunities in Tennessee and nationally to students and families. They also provide technical assistance to colleges and universities interested in starting programs on their campuses and educate legislators and policymakers about the benefits of inclusive higher education (Next Steps Annual Report, 2021).

Next Steps at Vanderbilt

The program Next Steps Vanderbilt program is committed to providing students in the neurodiverse community an inclusive, transformational postsecondary education in academics, social and career development, and independent living. They are dedicated to honoring equality, compassion, and excellence in all endeavors (Next Steps Annual Report, 2021). The following table recaps the components that help students excel. At the end of the four-year program, students receive a certificate of completion instead of a regular diploma.

Table 1: Next Steps at VU Program Overview

Academic Coursework	Students audit Vanderbilt courses rather than taking them for credit. Each student takes one to two courses per semester and has an individualized learning agreement that addresses how their involvement is supported.
Supplemental Seminars	Students take up to three Next Steps VU seminars each semester that are taught by program staff and graduate students. These seminars address topics such as independent living, self-determination, health and wellness, and career technology.
Career Development	Every semester, students participate in job shadowing experiences and internships. They also participate in on or off campus jobs designed to prepare them for employment post-graduation.
Campus Life	Students participate in the wide range of student organizations, service groups, and campus activities available to any Vanderbilt student. In addition, they are involved in orientation activities and Vanderbilt Visions during their freshman year. Vanderbilt Visions allows groups of new students to discover college together. All first-year students are assigned to one of 92 Vanderbilt Visions groups where they meet weekly with a faculty member, upper-class student mentor to form strong connections and build community.
Residential Living	Although most students live with family at home, some current and former students live with roommates in off-campus apartments and housing. Three Next Steps students are piloting an on-campus housing option Fall 2021.
Advising and Planning	All students receive weekly advising and participate in annual person-centered planning meetings. Through these meetings, students set individualized goals that inform their selection of courses, internships, work experiences, campus activities, social connections, seminars, and other experiences.

Problem of Practice

In initial conversations Next Steps at VU Career Development office administrators stated their goal to build new partnerships and maintain current relationships with internship supervisors. The first step of this initiative included gathering information about employer experiences and their needs. The data gathered from supervisors will be used to expand the

number of opportunities for students and to help employers as they support students and capitalize on their value to the workplace.

Internal vs. External Internships

The original internship model partnered with students to find and complete internships with Vanderbilt employers the first two years and work toward building off campus internships the final two years of their program. However, in Fall 2021 the Career Development team started to notice a shift in the student preferences to maintain on-campus internships. Staying with on campus employers for all four years supported the chance of landing full-time positions and possible co-op and work development opportunities at VU. Additionally, reorganization in the office's own staffing led to a rethinking of their intern support strategies. The timing seemed right for an assessment of employer experiences with a view to improving supports.

Next Steps at VU has celebrated many milestones with students and graduates, including academics, career development, and campus life achievements. The community is learning about the value of the Next Steps at VU impact. As enrollment in the class expands, more support is needed in the community to hire Next Steps at VU interns. Fortunately, a considerable amount of literature has developed around postsecondary education for the neurodiverse population as well as research on employability after school certificate programs.

Literature Review

Next Steps at VU seeks to improve the employment skills of the neurodiverse community. The laws that protect individuals with disability, postsecondary education programs, the growing importance of employment of neurodivergent people by businesses seeking to become more inclusive is the foundation of the literature that will inform my research.

Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage

Neurodiversity is a term coined by the sociologist Jody Singer to describe conditions such as ADHD, Autism, and Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Dyscalculia, Autistic Spectrum, Tourette Syndrome, and other neurological conditions (Doyle, 2020). The term neurodiversity shifts the focus away from the deficits, disorders, and impairments often associated with neurological differences. The term refers to the variety of ways that human minds are wired. It suggests that there are certain neurological differences which confer both challenges and gifts. The term neurodiversity is intended to remove the negative connotations often associated with individuals having physical or mental differences (Doyle, 2020).

Key Stakeholders. Recent reports in management highlight successful companies who promote neurodiversity and the recruitment of a neurodiverse workforce, including the software company SAP, Virgin Mobile, and Microsoft. In addition, companies such as Caterpillar, Dell Technologies, Deloitte, IBM, JPMorgan Chase, and UBS are considering ways to include neurodiverse talent in their workforce (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Those employers who have already adopted the recruitment of neurodiverse talent have shared success stories. For example, an executive at SAP described the contribution of a neurodiverse employee working as a customer-support analyst who spotted an opportunity to solve a common problem. The solution led to thousands of customers subsequently using the resources he created (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Despite the efforts to recruit and hire neurodiverse candidates, the U.S. Department of Labor reports that this population is still under-employed, and 80% still do not have jobs.

Loiacono and Huiman (2018) discuss why hiring employees from a neurodiverse community should be seen as a competitive advantage. Welcoming neurodiverse talent increases

the likelihood of succeeding in our global economy: they contribute diverse views, have the potential to innovate, increase adaptability and flexibility, and expand services to meet customer demands. The results are often also seen in their bottom line. Neurodiverse employees can possess the high-tech, problem-solving, and creative thinking skill sets needed by many organizations to compete in a global economy.

Economic Incentives. There are strong economic incentives for firms to hire individuals with disabilities. For example, many Asian and European countries have already enacted laws that specify quotas for the percentage of people with disabilities (including those who are neurodiverse) that businesses must employ. Depending on the country, companies, including multinational firms, that do not meet the quota are taxed at between 0.25% and 4% of their monthly payroll (Loiacono et al., 2018).

Demographics of the Issue

The demand for employment for neurodivergent employees can only be expected to grow. The percentage of eight-year-olds with autism grew by 150% between 2000 and 2018. Worldwide, one in 160 children now has ADD, and approximately 1% of the population is on the autism spectrum. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has seen a steady uptick in parent-reported ADHD from 1997 to the present; it's now 5.2% in the U.S., 1.1% in Australia and 7.3% in France. In addition, 16% of children in the U.S. now have some symptoms of dyspraxia, and 15% of the U.S. population has some degree of dyslexia. As these children become adults the workforce will have a significant neurodiverse talent base. Moreover, many adults are now being diagnosed as neurodiverse after years of being labelled simply as odd or different. Organizations who choose to think creatively about hiring a neurodiverse workforce will be seen as innovative leaders in promoting diversity (Loiacono et al., 2018).

Enhancements to the Workforce

Increasing employment options for individuals in the neurodiverse community promotes social and community integration and helps reduce negative beliefs toward people with disabilities (Barnes & Mercer, 2005). Negative perceptions toward people with disabilities create the view of a stigmatized minority group, build social barriers, and therefore limit employment opportunities (Baker et al., 2002). In one study on social barriers, Colella and Bruyere (2011) revealed employers in the hospitality and leisure share fears of “aesthetic anxiety” toward people with disabilities that prohibited hiring. The study went on to reveal they feared customers would perceive them as less attractive and negatively impact the bottom line (Colella, et al. 2011). This study revealed just one of the many examples that create stigma and bias in hiring decisions for individuals with disability.

Laws that Protect Individuals with Disability

Although the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 and the ADA Amendments Act (ADAAA) of 2008 protect the employment rights of people with disabilities to non-discriminatory employment practices, these laws do not guarantee an inclusive workplace for all. In the U.S., people with disabilities have higher unemployment rates than non-disabled people and they are likely to have less education and vocational training. These factors contribute to a poverty rate that is over three times higher than that of the general public (Wolfe & Haveman, 2000). Despite decades of effort to employ people with disabilities in the workforce, the rate of employment for adults with disabilities has decreased steadily over the last 20 years (Burkhauser et al., 2012).

Current Employment Data

Employment is an important milestone for all individuals. For many, having a job is a social determinant of health, contributing to improved physical and mental health, as well as self-esteem, confidence, and greater life satisfaction (Waddel & Burton, 2006). Employment provides individuals an environment to learn new and relevant skills, as well as to make money that gives access to life's necessities and pleasures (Lysaght et al., 2016). Individuals with intellectual disabilities have equal desire for this meaningful community participation and work life just like individuals without intellectual disability. Despite efforts and laws to make improvements, employment rates for people with intellectual disabilities remain low. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in 2020 that 17.9 percent of persons with a disability were employed and for persons without a disability, 61.8 percent were employed in 2020 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

Impact of Post-secondary Education Inclusion

In order to cultivate a neurodiverse workforce, it is essential for individuals with intellectual disabilities to learn more about employment opportunities and programs that prepare them beyond high school graduation (Bennett et al., 2010). Postsecondary education (PSE) programs like Next Steps VU have emerged for young adults with autism, ID, and other developmental disabilities to bridge the gap to full time employment by providing course participation, campus involvement, and career-related preparation. More than 300 PSE programs currently exist to equip college students with disabilities for the transition to the world of work through a combination of well-supported academic and vocational experiences (Moore & Schelling, 2015).

Vocational emphasis. Most PSE programs offer vocational preparation in the form of career development coursework, job shadowing, networking opportunities, and internship

placements and build experiences into the 4 years to connect students to the workplace so they can develop the vocational and social skills needed to find employment (Next Steps Annual Report, 2021). The impact the career development component has on employability rates is significant. One study on PSE programs found that post-graduation, “100 % of individuals with ID who attended a PSE program for students with disabilities were employed, compared to 43% of individuals who did not attend” (Westling et al., 2013, pp. 307). While the employment outcomes for PSE graduates are encouraging, additional efforts are needed to strengthen vocational training and internship experiences within these programs (Gilson & Carter, 2016).

Ryan, et al. (2019) found in a study of graduates of a mixed/hybrid PSE program which combines both an inclusionary setting (e.g., academic classes) with typical college students, along with classes taken with other students with disabilities to teach specific skills (e.g., independent living) attained significantly higher rates of employment and independent living than their peers. Findings from this study stress the importance a PSE program can have in the lives of individuals with ID. While employment outcomes exceeded the national average, findings were consistent with prior studies, showing that individuals with ID were rarely employed full time and likely did not receive work-related benefits (Siperstein et al., 2013).

Mentoring emphasis. Athamanah et al. (2020) found that peer mentoring programs, such as the one offered by Next Steps VU, that involve individuals with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities are shown to benefit the mentors, the participants, and the institutions which house these programs. Mentors reported the experience of growth in their personal development. They also expressed an interest in continuing career work in fields that allow for involvement with individuals with ID and better rates of self-awareness, understanding, and patience. Participants experienced improvements in communication skills and independence. The

institutions housing these programs became more inclusive, further “normalized” disabilities, and allowed for more opportunities for both students with and without intellectual learning disabilities (Athamanah et al., 2020).

Skill, employment and earnings benefits. Another study by Gilson, et al. (2016) revealed the benefits received by students with intellectual disabilities are seen in their task engagement levels and social skills. Job coaches and mentors who participated in the study were found to have a higher likelihood of hiring individuals with intellectual disabilities in their organizations (Gilson et al, 2016). Individuals with ID who attend PSE programs not only have higher employment rates, they have higher weekly wages than those who don’t (Migliore et al., 2009). Finally, studies show that students who participated in PSE programs were twice as likely to secure competitive employment compared to individuals than those who did not attend PSE programs (Southward & Kyzar, 2017).

Employer misconceptions

A number of industries that hire individuals with intellectual disabilities have shifted in the past 20 years to be more inclusive (Welham, 2012). While occupational therapy was a primary industry that opened its doors to the idea, others have now extended opportunities because of the employment laws implemented in recent decades. Erickson et al., (2014) break the challenges into supply-side (the individuals with ID) barriers including employment-related skills, lack of sufficient training of people with disability, and availability of job candidates with disability. They go on to describe demand-side (employer issues) barriers such as organizational culture, beliefs on related additional costs, and negative attitudes of staff and human resources professionals. Additional research by Olney & Kennedy (2001) found that people with

intellectual disability are less likely to be employed in inclusive work settings than persons with other disabilities.

Human resource concerns. The challenges with entry are often linked to perceived legal issues. Kocman et al, (2018) conducted a survey with 30 HR managers to assess the differences in perceived barriers for employment of people with specific disabilities and mental disorders; barriers specific to employing people with intellectual disability; and strategies to overcome these barriers. They found that employers see hiring individuals with ID has more barriers than hiring individuals with physical disabilities. Employers had inaccurate information on the skill set and legal issues that are often seen as a challenge when hiring individuals with ID. In this study employers disclosed that they lacked information needed to find or recruit candidates who are neurodivergent. Their recommendations include creating incentives, stories, and explicit instructions for how to move forward with hiring neurodiverse employees. They also recommended using training and networking events by external employment consultants to spread the messaging and introduce the benefits (Kocman et al, 2018). Not only is employment of neurodivergent people a social justice issue and a legal requirement, it is becoming clear that there is value to their employment including but not limited to the individuals hired, to the organizations hiring them and to society. Organizations such as Next Steps at VU are in a position to support the preparation of the neurodivergent college students' employability skills, and to provide critical support to employers seeking to become more inclusive.

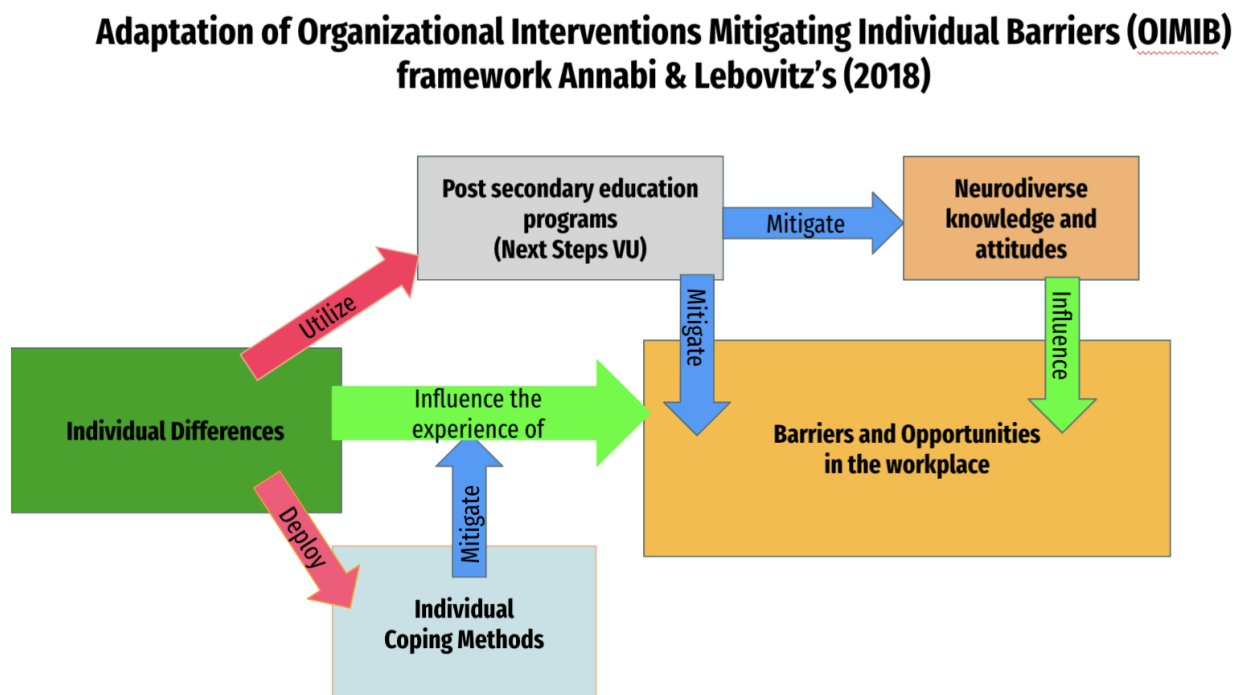
Conceptual framework

Annabi & Lebovitz's (2018) research on organizational interventions mitigating individual barriers (OIMIB) to employment can be adapted as a framework for examining the experiences of Next Steps VU supervisors. This framework explores the positive outcomes

associated with hiring a neurodiverse workforce. The application of the OIMIB framework to the Next Steps at VU career development program has clear implications for practice.

Figure 3

Annabi & Lebovitz's (2018) organizational interventions mitigating individual barriers (OIMIB) framework and adapted to the context of Next Steps students working with employers



Supports Needed for Supervisors of Neurodiverse Employees

The employers who support Next Steps at VU students are often very enthusiastic about the opportunity, yet many do not have access to the resources required to facilitate a productive inclusive neurodivergent employment. First, when interviewing the specific barriers and concerns encountered by those who are neurodivergent may not be as noticeable to those who are neurotypical. These differences can go unnoticed in the hiring process, during onboarding and even once the interns are fully trained. This can result in supervisors becoming frustrated because they did not fully understand the individual gifts and challenges associated with hiring

neurodiverse employees. Despite the support employers often provide for a neurodivergent hire, the individuals may continue to feel pressure to disguise or hide their condition even when the employer actively promotes neurodiversity which can in turn cause frustration in the employee. In response, Annabi and Lebovitz (2018) build a framework for employees and employers to mitigate the challenges and the first step is focused on embracing individual differences they bring to the workplace as opportunities for growth instead of barriers.

Challenges in the Process

OIMIB provides a holistic framework for understanding the points at which Next Steps VU Career Development team has an impact on helping the employers mitigate the challenges. For example, the blue arrows in the graphic show how neurodivergent individuals can learn coping skills needed for employment. This is a point where the job coach supporting the intern can intervene to teach appropriate workplace skills. Another arrow shows the importance of Next Steps understanding their students and community to provide employers resources that might reduce barriers to employment. The Next Steps at VU Career Development team plays a key role in connecting with employers to provide a community of support where students increase their employability success and employers see the contributions the neurodiverse community has on their organization, culture, and overall success.

Addressing the Challenges

The framework provides a multilevel theoretical lens through which to explore the complex issues around inclusion of marginalized employees in the neurodiverse community. OIMIB provides contexts for how the components may be used to investigate and test the relationships between the constructs for which they operate, specifically Next Steps interns, the Next Steps Career Development team and the employers who host their students. I draw on this

theoretical framework for four reasons. First, the study of a neurodiverse workforce is a relatively new phenomenon and few if any established theories are available to draw from (Morris et al., 2015). Second, the lens through which OIMIB was developed provides a voice to individuals with neurodiversity and utilizes a strength model rather than a deficit model. Third, OIMIB synthesizes the literature and provides a holistic picture of the relevant factors (challenges, supports, benefits) that affect individuals within the neurodiverse community. Last, OIMIB uses a holistic approach by isolating interrelated components and suggests that organizations who partner with PSE programs mitigate barriers in the workplace for neurodiverse employees. The framework mitigates negative attitudes toward neurodiverse employees and improves knowledge about the gifts neurodiverse employees offer.

Table 2

OIMIB framework (Annabi & Lebovitz, 2018) applied Next Steps at VU community

Individual differences	The neurodiverse community brings unique gifts, challenges and behaviors that need to be considered in employment research. Understanding and appreciating individual differences is an important step for success in the mitigation of overcoming barriers for entering the workforce. The Next Steps Career Development team partners with their employers to educate them on the gifts and challenges that may surface upon hiring their students. Job coaches, training, and mentorship provided by Next Steps support employers by explaining the individual differences each candidate brings to the role.
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Barriers and opportunities	Individuals within the neurodiverse community experience barriers and challenges often unique to their personal gifts and challenges. These require a level of accommodation and support. The Next Steps Career Development team provides tools for overcoming these barriers including job coaches and materials to use for time blocking and setting learning goals.
Individual coping methods	This component of the framework addresses the coping methods individuals who are neurodivergent may deploy to stay employed. The Next Steps Career Development team fosters positive coping methods such as informal networks with their cohort of students and emphasizes the importance of the students working closely with their job coaches.
Post secondary education programs	One proven way to intervene in the system of challenges for the neurodiverse community is participation in a postsecondary education (PSE) experience. The Next Steps Career Development team works to advocate and place their students with employers.

Research Questions

Given the amount of success Next Steps has had on increasing the employability of their graduates to 91% in 2021, an examination of supervisors is warranted. The volume of supervisors who have hosted Next Steps interns and the growth of their program to a cohort from six students when they first started, to now 50 students further supports the need to explore why and how Next Steps has had such great success with the employers in the community who host their students as interns. The work of the Next Steps Career Development team points to a positive increase in the likelihood that employers see neurodiversity as a competitive advantage. They have developed a system for mitigating the barriers often associated with negative stereotypes related to hiring neurodiverse employees. Annabi and Lebovitz's (2018) OIMIB

provides a framework for which to evaluate the benefits, challenges, and supports and recommend the steps needed for highlighting the individual differences neurodiverse employees bring to the workplace. The conceptual framework informs the following research questions used to survey supervisors who have hosted Next Steps interns.

Research Question 1:

What are the benefits for supervisors in hosting Next Steps VU interns?

Research Question 2:

What are the challenges for supervisors in hosting Next Steps VU interns?

Research Question 3:

What supports do Next Steps VU supervisors report receiving and what were the most helpful?

Project Design

Hiring a neurodiverse workforce has many benefits and should be seen as a competitive advantage and a means of capturing the value of inclusiveness in all kinds of organizations (Austin et al, 2017). The uncertainty many employers report concerning the benefits of hiring a neurodiverse workforce indicates the need to better understand the experiences of supervisors who have hosted neurodivergent interns. Supervisors collaborating with Vanderbilt's postsecondary education program, Next Steps, represent an excellent resource. See Appendix D and E for an explanation of the program and comments from employers who have hosted Next Steps interns.

A total of 21 employers who hosted the Next Steps at Vanderbilt students answered an electronic survey on their experiences hosting student interns. Employers were asked a variety of open-ended questions and other rating questions (i.e. on a scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree). I analyzed the responses and created categories for their subjective responses. The sample was composed of 9 Vanderbilt employers and 12 employers outside Vanderbilt. The employers

from outside of Vanderbilt were from a range of industries, each with different experiences with hosting interns. Of the 21 employers who responded, 10 hosted only one intern, and one organization hosted over 10. In terms of industry, "Education and Training" and "Human Services" were the most prominent sectors.

Methods

Data was collected in May 2021 using a google form titled "Next Steps at Vanderbilt Student Intern Experience Survey." The Next Steps VU team sent the survey to 60 employers who had hosted Next Steps VU interns. Lindsay Krech, Co-Director of Career Development, sent the survey to 30 Vanderbilt site supervisors. Megan Macon, Co-Director of Career Development, sent the survey to 30 off campus site supervisors.

The survey was adapted from a Project SEARCH Employer Survey (Muller et al., 2018). Project SEARCH is a popular vocational training program serving young adults with intellectual disabilities. They offer 400 program sites in 45 states and nine countries. Project SEARCH incorporates many best practices for school to work programs including responsiveness to employer needs that are used by the Next Steps VU Career Development team (Appendix B).

Participants

Eligible participants included employers from Next Steps internship sites who have hosted at least one Next Steps intern. Since 2010, a total of 60 employers met these eligibility criteria. The original survey was distributed via email on May 19th. A reminder email was sent Tuesday, May 25th (Appendix A). The deadline for collecting responses was May 28th. A total of 21 responses were received.

Results

A total of 21 out of the 60 employers who hosted the Next Steps at VU students answered an electronic survey on their experiences. Employers were asked a variety of open-ended questions and other rating questions (i.e. on a scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree). Findings and graphs were created by counting the number of times a response category was mentioned in the answers.

Key Findings

As of 2021, approximately 60 inclusive employers had hosted Next Steps at VU students. The goal of the program is to continue to refine these relationships in support of student internship participation. The 35% of employers who responded saw Next Steps at VU interns as genuine assets for creating a culture of inclusivity and enhancing their overall organizational performance. The responses indicate that Next Steps at VU staff has found a formula to successfully integrate students into their internship opportunities with the support of a job coach. The findings expand on how Next Steps at VU has created a program that leads to creating gainful employment for the interns and positive outcomes on the organization who support them.

Survey Results

In review, the sample was composed of 9 Vanderbilt employers and 12 off-campus employers. The employers were from diverse industries and had varying experiences with hosting Next Steps at VU interns. 10/21 employers hosted only one intern, and the most experienced organization hosted over 10. In terms of industry, "Education and Training" and "Human Services" were the most prominent sectors. A full list of the organizations can be found in Appendix C.

Figure 4
Responses by industry of employers who responded

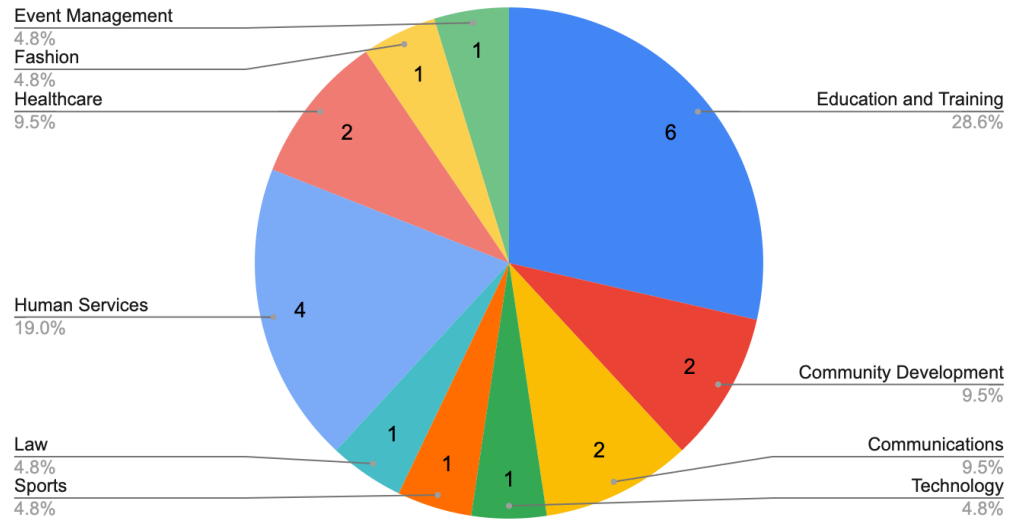


Figure 5
Respondents who hosted VU at Next Steps interns

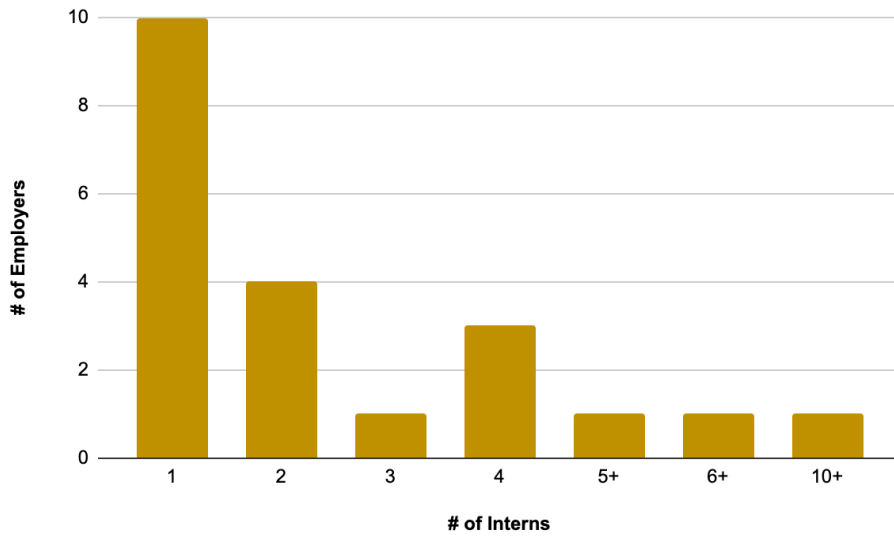
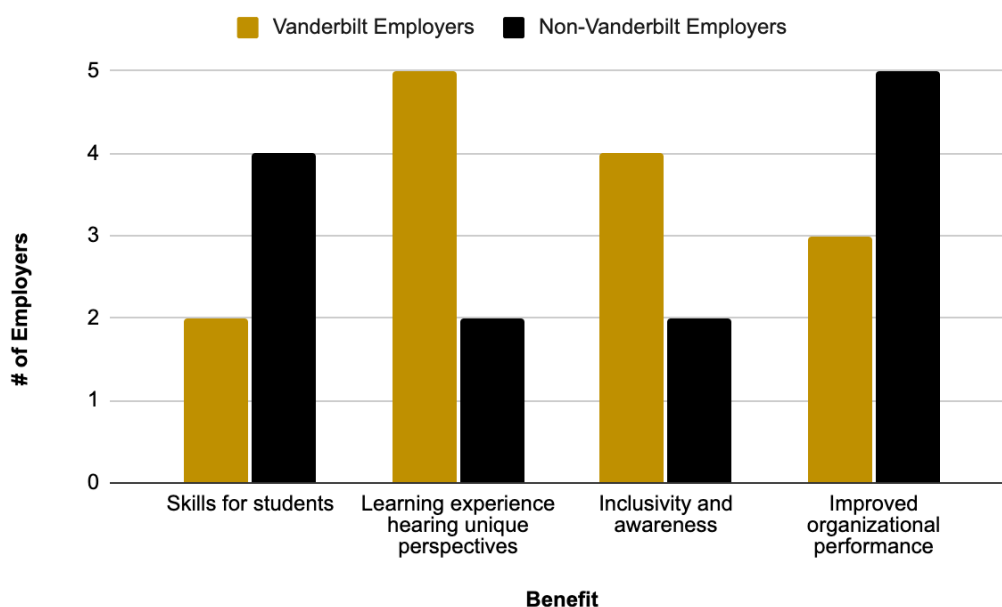


Figure 6*Benefits to hosting Next Steps at VU Interns***Analysis of Benefits**

When asked to identify the benefits of hosting Next Steps VU interns there was a wide range of responses. Employer experiences were contingent upon the individual students they hosted and the work tasks assigned, however a pattern of findings surfaced into four categories.

Table 3*Supervisors' Narratives on Benefits*

Benefits explained & # of employers who shared as a benefit	Sample Employer Comments
<p>Skill development (12/21): Supervisors reported the most gratifying benefit was being able to train their interns on skills needed for increasing their likelihood of employment in the future.</p>	<p>“That we get to help develop more independent skills.”</p> <p>“Providing the Next Steps students an inclusive environment so they can learn real life skills.”</p> <p>“The interns have helped tremendously with completing the data entry for our programs,</p>

	<p>which has lifted a weight off our program managers and staff.”</p> <p>“Our Next Steps interns produced excellent media for our department, often serving as role models to other student producers who witnessed the interns’ high level of commitment and volume of production.”</p> <p>“Assistance with social media; created his own content (episode) for the show”</p>
<p>Return on investment (7/21): The supervisors reported a significant benefit was the time spent with their interns resulted in a more positive workplace environment, increased customer service and greater employer job satisfaction among employees.</p>	<p>"Most employers know that taking on an intern is going to mean more work for the employer, at least on the front end. However, the return on investment is substantial when you work with a Next Steps intern. At the end of the day, I feel like we're succeeding when we work with Next Steps, but when we go through a semester without an intern, it always feels like something is missing."</p> <p>“We are actually providing an educational experience for everyone.”</p> <p>“Creativity and fresh outlook for marketing engagement.”</p> <p>“Improvements to my teaching/instructional approach with all students. I’m a better listener, and I can more readily customize my approach depending on a student’s needs and interests.”</p>
<p>Inclusivity and awareness (6/21): Supervisors who hosted Next Steps interns reported the benefits of increased awareness on the importance of inclusivity in the workplace.</p>	<p>"Hosting Next Steps interns has provided the opportunity for both staff and students to learn together, plan and execute important projects with inclusion and learning as primary goals."</p> <p>“This is important work. Creating inclusive communities that value each person is important work.”</p>

	<p>“As an organization doing work facing special educators, it is great to be able to work with self-advocates who can create materials and projects that can serve as exemplary work from their population.”</p> <p>“Creating a more inclusive environment.”</p> <p>“Their perspective on our services, as we are an organization that serves people with disabilities.”</p> <p>"Our ministry is for teenagers with disabilities. It is a game changer to have an intern with a disability helping to lead our ministry who looks like the population we are serving. It gives our current participants and parents a vision for what they could grow into!"</p>
<p>Improved organizational performance (8/21): Employers shared a benefit was the work Next Steps interns performed had significant contributions to the organizations.</p>	<p>“Having an intern from Next Steps benefits everyone- the community, the staff, and the intern.”</p> <p>“An extra set of hands to support the Center, gave staff the opportunity to build their teaching/modeling skills and supervisory skills, promoted teamwork with staff, promoted accountability with staff.”</p> <p>“Having additional, capable human capital improves the efficiency of services that our office offers.”</p> <p>“It has been beneficial to have extra help at The Store and also having someone who is dedicated and passionate about what we do and who we serve.”</p>

Culture Change

Culture change was evident across all industries and responses. When employers hosted students, their organizations were exposed to this diverse underrepresented population. In return, they created a culture that embraced a more inclusive workspace for their own colleagues. As a result, employees are more inclined to hire employees in the neurodiverse community and be better prepared to set them up for success.

Figure 7

Respondents share impact on the culture

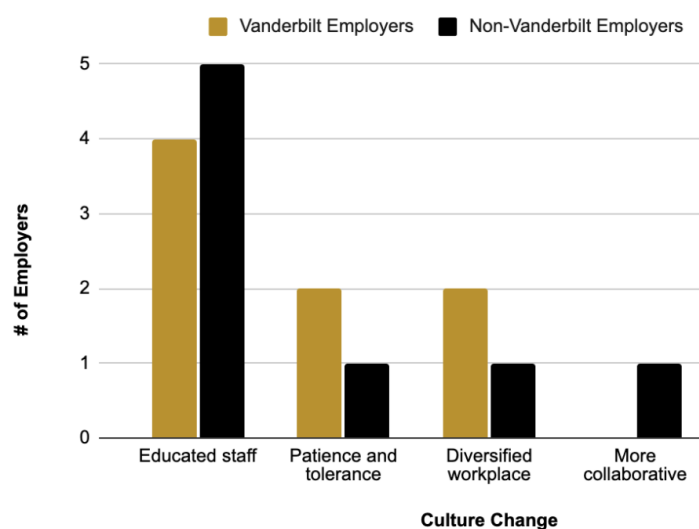


Table 4

Supervisors' Responses to Culture Change

Culture Changes Defined & # of responses	Sample Employer Comments
Educated staff (9/21): Employers highlighted that not only were they teaching students professional skills, but they were also learning	“Our intern brought smiles, and happiness to the team. He also gave us great teaching moments that not only improved his skill sets,

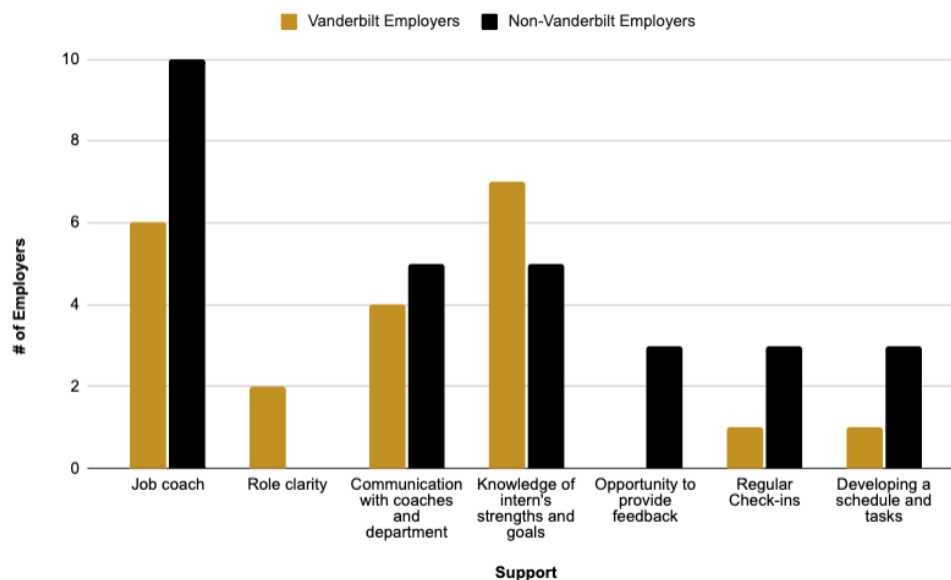
from the students every step of the way.	but mine as well. That is extremely valuable to us."
Patience and tolerance (3/21): By collaborating with students daily, employees were made aware of the need to provide individuals with ID opportunities in the workplace.	"I think we are more tolerant in general and have learned to work more collaboratively"
Diversified workplace (3/21): Welcoming Next Steps at VU students resulted in a heightened awareness of the value of diversity in the workplace. This insight will open doors for additional experiences for individuals with ID. The increased awareness will cause employers to be more willing to host individuals with ID as interns in the future.	"I believe it made my staff more sensitive to the needs of all individuals, regardless of disability, that enabled them to feel like they have meaningfully and purposefully contributed to the workforce."
More collaborative (1/21): Employers shared that in collaboration (students, supervisors, patrons) gained so many learning skills from our Next Steps experience. The idea of learning in collaboration is what they loved most.	"We have worked across departments at [the site] to 'share' Next Steps interns. The opportunity to collaborate on projects has created opportunities for staff to connect in ways that we would not traditionally and invited important conversations about ability and inclusion."

Supervisors Assets for Support

Supervisors were asked to rank the most valuable supports and tools they received from the Career Development team in making the internship successful. In Figure 8, the frequency in which certain supports appeared on employers' top three lists is displayed.

Figure 8

The most valuable supports received by the Next Steps VU staff

**Table 5**

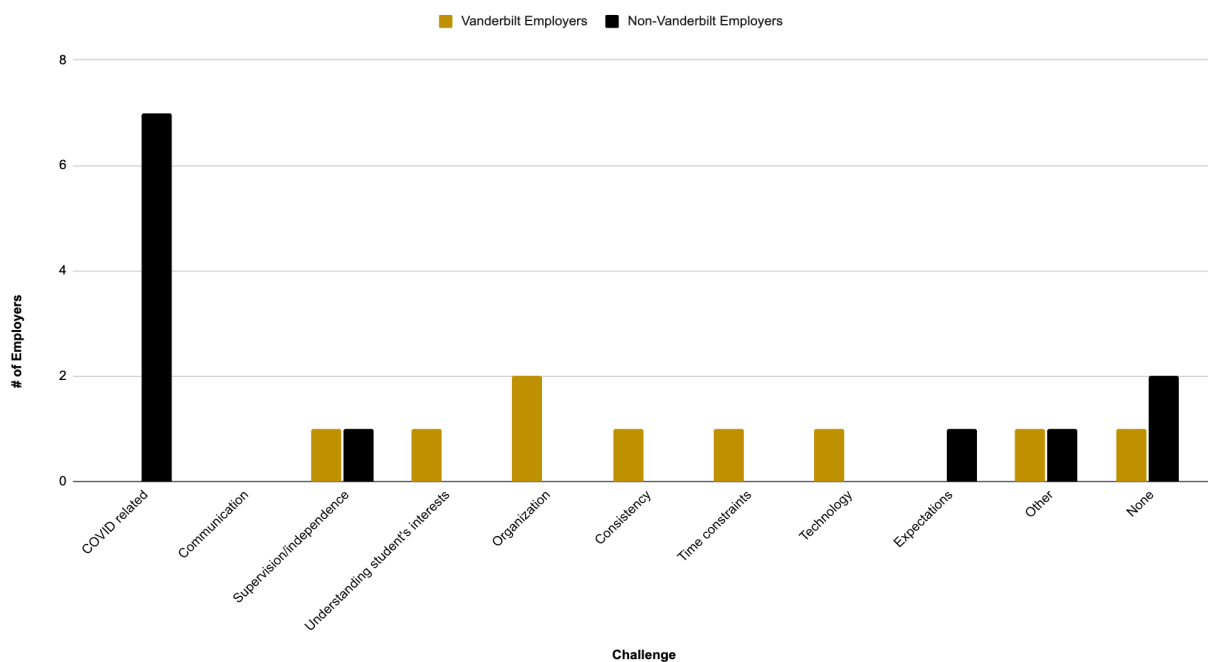
Supervisors Assets for Support

Supports defined and # of responses	Sample Employer Comments
<p>Job Coach (16/21): The job coach brings great value by serving as a liaison between the student and employer. They aid the preparation, training, accountability, and learning goal success of the student. The Next Steps at VU student is then able to develop a timeline to transition to working independently with the assistance of the job coach. By learning how to prepare and stay organized, students are able to learn and apply best practices for future employability.</p>	<p>"The Next Steps coaches greatly set our intern up for success and prepared him well for weekly tasks. He was well prepared and really added to the events he helped serve in."</p>
<p>Establish Role Clarity (2/21): Finding the right job for interns that will offer them a successful outcome and positive experience is often a challenge.</p>	<p>"The biggest challenges I have found are trying to find where exactly an intern's interests lay. I always want the work that I do with interns to reflect them and their individuality, but it can be hard to get them to</p>

	express themselves in that way when the concepts and tools we work with are often so new to them."
Communication with coaches & Next Steps VU team (9/21): The email correspondence, site visits and weekly check ins were an added benefit to the experience.	"The support has been phenomenal and that has made this relationship all the more while."
Knowledge of interns strengths and goals (12/21): Supervisors emphasized the importance of understanding the strengths, weaknesses, and interests of each Next Steps at VU intern. This allowed employees to individually design the job role to the learning goals the student communicates.	"Know how the intern wants to grow and what they want to experience and be developed in through their internship. It'd help an employer better cater responsibilities, constructive feedback, and evaluations."
Opportunity to provide feedback (3/21): Designing learning goals allowed the employer to give constructive feedback on areas for growth and empower their interns to build employability skills.	"Open communication with Next Steps at Vanderbilt, plan ahead, meet with the job coach before the intern arrives and set up your communication goals, plan for accountability"
Regular check ins (4/21): Establishing a routine for checking in with the job coach, intern and Next Steps VU was an important tool that aided success.	"I felt the interns were supported well by their job coach and the program, and that we were supported by the interns, job coaches and program coordinators. It really feels like a team effort and I love that energy!"
Developing a schedule and tasks (4/21): By learning how to prepare and stay organized, students are able to learn and apply best practices for future employability.	"Plan and execute important projects with inclusion and learning as primary goals."

Challenges to Host Next Steps Interns

When asked what are the challenges for hosting Next Steps VU interns, the impact of COVID-19 created many obstacles. The findings are mapped below with additional challenges and employer comments.

Figure 9*Challenges to hosting Next Steps at VU interns***Challenges of Hosting Next Steps Students****Table 6***Supervisors Response to Challenges*

Challenges # of times report	Sample Employer Comments
COVID Related (7/21)	“Because of COVID, the biggest challenge has been interacting virtually, instead of being able to serve and work in-person face-to-face.”
Amount of supervision/independence (2/21)	“In some cases, needing one-on-one supervision to complete many tasks. The Next Steps students have a more limited range of skill sets and ability to problem solve than the traditional Vanderbilt students, so finding the right job for them to do that will offer them a successful outcome and positive experience is

	often a challenge.”
Understanding students interest (1/21)	“The biggest challenges I have found are trying to find where exactly an interns interests lay. I always want the work that I do with interns to reflect them and their individuality, but it can be hard to get them to express themselves in that way when the concepts and tools we work with are often so new to them.”
Communication & Organization (2/21)	“I wish I would have had a better understanding of the program and more guidance to prepare to host an intern. We figured it out, but as we went along.”
Time constraints (1/21)	“Planning meaningful and ongoing project work for the intern/s can be difficult given the limited and specific weekly timing. We often had intern projects that were one off based on needs of the week and 2-3 hour time constraints, but were not able to engage students in larger projects or events that would allow them to see larger deliverables and a final product built over time.”
Technology (1/21)	“Much of the work we do is computer-based, which is difficult for some students. While most interns quickly learn how to get out of the newsroom and interview fellow students (an achievement in itself), media production still requires editing and posting with software and online networks.”
Expectations (1/21)	“People do not always know what they can ask of the interns.”

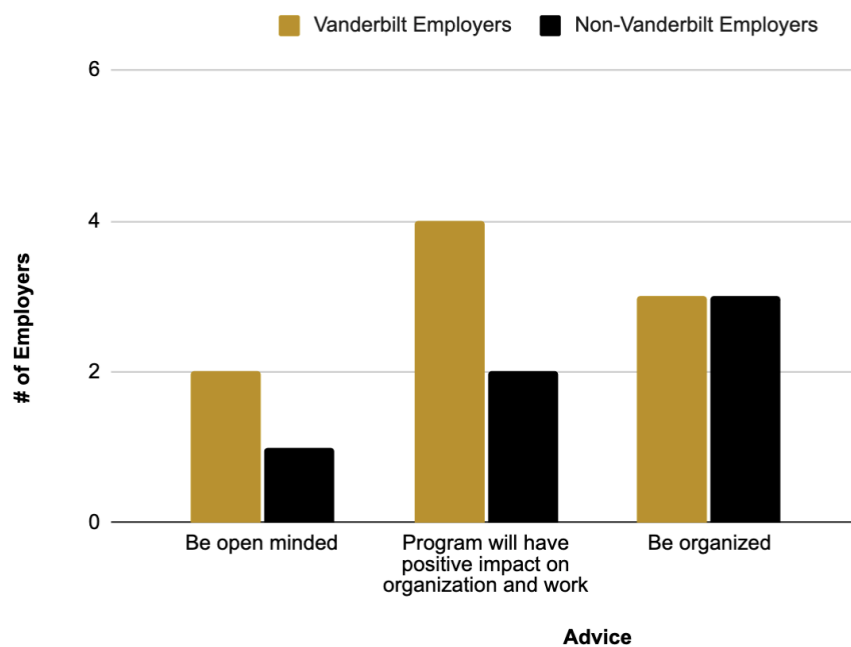
Advice to Future Supervisors

Employers were asked to share tips with future supervisors who host Next Steps interns.

Three of the most common responses are highlighted in Figure 10.

Figure 10

Advice for employers hosting Next Steps interns in the future

**Table 7**

Supervisors Share Advice

Advice defined and # of times recommended	Sample Employer Comments
Be open minded (3/21): Keep an open mind and build in a level of flexibility	"Go into it with an open mind because you are bound to learn from them just as much as they may learn from you."
Program engagement will have a positive impact on the organization and work (6/21): Employers emphasized the value of making the commitment and investment in hosting a Next Steps student, impacts will be direct and indirect.	"People now recognize the importance of employment opportunities for students with ID, who we already serve in our building."
Be organized (6/21): Have a clear path with end goals and due dates.	"The next Steps students work best with a daily consistent routine and checklists. Providing activities in which the Next Steps

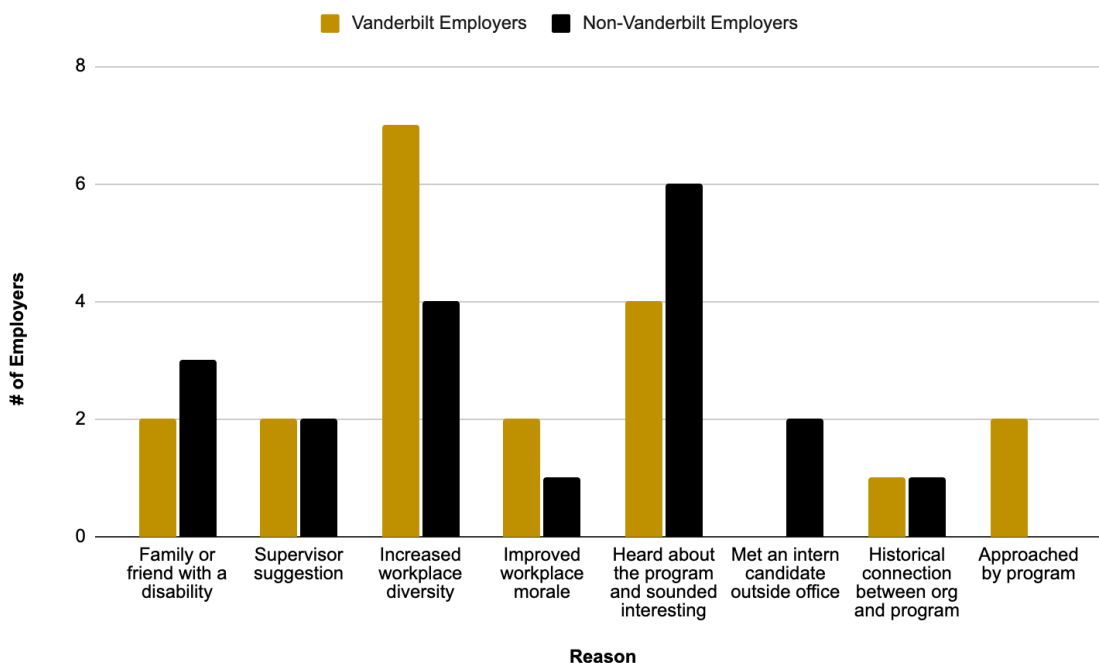
	students can be as independent as possible and as successful as possible is ideal."
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Supervisor Testimony for Continuing with Next Steps

Employers shared a variety of factors that determine why they have hosted Next Steps at VU students in the past. These responses are particularly important for considering where and how to promote the opportunity to future internship supervisors.

Figure 11

The reason why employers host Next Steps at VU students



Recommendations

Findings from this data collection process contribute to the understanding of how employers perceive the benefits, challenges, and supports needed to hire neurodiverse employees. The recommendations for these findings are outlined here as are limitations for this study and suggestions for possible future research. Satisfaction among the supervisors was very high, 99% report they want to host and hire Next Steps interns. This finding supports Henandez et al., (2008) research that showed hiring one intern from the neurodiverse community is a strong predictor the employer will repeat this step. These findings suggest that the Next Steps Career Development team provides high quality training for their job coaches that support the interns while on site and ensures employers feel properly supported when hosting their students as interns. The data from 21 employers who have hosted Next Steps at VU interns reported challenges, benefits and most valuable support and overwhelmingly felt valued as a Next Steps internship supervisor.

Respondents shared some challenges with lack of knowledge of what their intern was interested in working on prior to arrival, inconsistency in the amount of supervision required semester to semester and the importance of having a good working relationship with the job coach that goes on site with the Next Steps intern. The summary of responses inform four recommendations to mitigate these challenges, strengthen current and new relationships and continue to build a neurodiverse workforce. They have the potential to grow new relationships, advocate for inclusive organizations, and build a more tolerant society.

Table 8*Four Recommendations for the Next Steps Career Development Team*

<p>Recommendation #1. <i>Partner with employers to accommodate and understand the individual needs of neurodivergent interns.</i></p>	<p>Recommendation #2. <i>Promote the ongoing supervisor coaching that is available for the duration of the internship.</i></p>	<p>Recommendation #3. <i>Train the employers who host neurodivergent interns on how to reevaluate recruitment and hiring practices.</i></p>	<p>Recommendation #4. <i>Encourage the employers to adopt advocacy and policy changes that reward hiring neurodiverse interns.</i></p>
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These findings inform the following four recommendations for building and refining new relationships with employers. The recommendations will serve as the foundation for curriculum changes that support job coaches, supervisor onboarding/engagement workshops, and the development of marketing tools to share with the organizations who will support Next Steps interns in the future.

Recommendation #1. *Partner with employers to understand and accommodate the individual needs of neurodivergent interns.*

Many of the supervisor responses indicated ongoing challenges related to a lack of understanding of the interns' interests. One supervisor reported, "The biggest challenges I have found are trying to find where exactly an intern's interests lay. I always want the work that I do with interns to reflect them and their individuality, but it can be hard to get them to express themselves in that way when the concepts and tools we work with are often so new to them." In response, the Next Steps Career Development team should host onboarding workshops for supervisors. The content will acknowledge hiring interns in the neurodiverse community is not a one-size-fits-all approach and provide resources for identifying their gifts.

One supervisor reported, “I would love to be connected to other organizations that have hired interns in order to hear their stories and advice, as having an intern on staff is one of our goals.” Another commented, “The Next Steps students work best with a daily consistent routine and checklists. Providing activities in which the Next Steps students can be as independent as possible and as successful as possible is ideal.” The onboarding workshops will provide a space to build community and share tools that enhance relationships with neurodiverse interns, including weekly check in and time blocking resources. These workshops will provide spaces to role play conversations that identify strengths, challenges, and methods for troubleshooting how to best supervise neurodiverse employees. Supervisors will exit the workshop with a request to meet with the interns prior to arrival with the goal of learning about their personal interests. In addition, they will be provided with prep tools that aid in building learning goals and a weekly tasks list that benefit both the intern and organization.

Recommendation #2. Promote the ongoing supervisor coaching that is available for the duration of the internship.

Next Steps at VU supervisors reported, “I wish I would have had a better understanding of the program and more guidance to prepare to host an intern. We figured it out, but as we went along” and another shared, “people don't always know what they can ask of the interns.” The Next Steps Career Development team should acknowledge that supervisors may not always feel comfortable about how to communicate with neurodiverse interns even after the student has been on site for a few weeks. Encourage the supervisors to access the ongoing support including job coaches, learning plans, video training, and discussion forums the Next Steps Career Development provides to enhance open supervisor and intern communication. Most importantly, ask the supervisors to build a positive working relationship with the intern’s job coach and lean

on them for support. Emphasize how important this is at the start of the internship, when the job coach accompanies the intern for the full work shift.

One supervisor reported, “Allow yourself to be open and honest with Next Steps staff and the intern’s job coach. Don’t worry that you’ll misspeak. A huge benefit of participating is to learn the language and rethink your approach to working with others. Pay careful attention to how the staff/job coaches interact with the interns and use that as your guide as well.” As the semester progresses, the goal is to create an increased level of independence for the intern where the job coach spends less time on site. The Next Steps Career Development team should emphasize how important it is to develop a relationship with the job coach at the start of the internship. They should share that building this relationship will increase the likelihood of a positive learning experience for the organization and intern.

Recommendation #3. Train the employers who host neurodivergent interns how to reevaluate recruitment and hiring practices.

The Next Steps Career Development team should recommend supervisors create evaluation processes that allow for the expression of the interns strengths. Relying on traditional job interviews often creates bias against individuals with atypical manners of interaction (Krzeminska et. al, 2019). The Next Steps Career Development team should train supervisors to use creative recruitment formats including pre-interviews, informal conversations, online interest assessments and onsite problem-solving team activities using an online blog platform. The Next Steps Career Development team should provide examples of these tools in information materials shared with employers who inquire about hosting Next Steps interns.

Recommendation #4. Encourage the employers to adopt advocacy and policy changes that reward hiring neurodiverse interns.

Supervisors reported the most common reason they hosted Next Steps interns was because they have a family or friend with an intellectual disability. The Next Steps Career Development team should encourage supervisors to share written and audio recorded stories about neurodivergent friends and family members to highlight the gifts they bring to the workplace. The stories can be used in the onboarding workshops and testimonials in marketing materials to aid in creating a culture that advocates for the neurodiverse. The second most common reason supervisors reported hosting interns was because they heard about the program through a friend or referral. The Next Steps Career Development team should use their preexisting supervisor relationships in a deliberate way to ask for referrals, create marketing materials, online blog posts, and a community discussion forum. These action steps will shift the focus to a societal advocacy movement for the neurodiverse that will not only refine current relationships but also grow new partnerships.

Discussion

Next Steps at Vanderbilt has been operating since 2010 to promote the increase in employment for college aged neurodiverse students. They are committed to providing college-age students in the neurodiverse community an inclusive and transformational post-secondary education in academics, social and career development, and independent living. To help Next Steps refine relationships with employers who seek to include a more neurodiverse workforce and to provide support for their students and experiences, the organizational interventions mitigating individual barriers conceptual framework was used to understand current supervisor experiences. The supervisors appear to be highly satisfied with Next Steps interns and the Next Steps Career Development team.

Limitations of the Research

It would be helpful to conduct follow up in-depth interviews with the supervisors who participated in the survey. This was a limitation of this research. The response rate was 35% and participation in this research was limited to a sample size of 21/60 employers who have supported Next Steps at VU interns. This single data sample size was limited to one Post-Secondary Education program out of the 306 that operate across the U.S. An additional limitation was the impact COVID-19 had on the role interns held in the nine months just before the survey was distributed. The organization may gain additional benefits from gathering data from additional site supervisors post pandemic. Future research might include insight into the student experience.

Future Directions

In the future, Next Steps at VU could explore the challenges, benefits and supports reported by supervisors from other post-secondary educational programs like Next Steps. This research demonstrates the Next Steps Vanderbilt Career Development team has created a model of success for increasing employability for the neurodiverse. One supervisor noted, “The care and thought that Next Steps staff puts into internship selection and placement with students, the job shadowing partnership has enabled us to build trust with both staff and students and helped create a natural partnership to host interns, as well.” Deliberate attention to providing managerial support, recognizing individual needs, rethinking hiring practices, and shifting the focus to a societal advocacy movement would be beneficial to refining the current relationships and growing new partnerships.

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Appendix: Email sent to Next Steps at VU Supervisors

Email sent to Next Steps at VU Supervisors

Dear Next Steps VU Supervisors,

You are invited to participate in a survey that examines the impact of organizations who support inclusive work environments by hosting college age interns with intellectual disabilities. The data collected will help inform future supervisors with recommendations and benefits of providing spaces for inclusion of interns with learning disabilities.

If you have any questions, please contact the principal investigator, Kristen Tompkins or email me kristen.tompkins@vanderbilt.edu. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the Vanderbilt Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 615-322-2918.

Please print or save a copy of this page for your records.

I have read the above information and agree to participate in this research project. Please click the link below to indicate whether you would like to participate in the follow up interview.

This survey will take 5-10 minutes to complete.

The survey was linked in a google form.

Thank you for hosting Vanderbilt University Next Steps students as interns with your organization. We value your contribution to the Next Steps community and the impact you have on providing an inclusive workplace for college students with intellectual disabilities.

Your responses to the following questions will:

1. Prepare our Next Steps students for applying for future internships
2. Build recommendations and impact stories for new employers who host Next Steps interns

Note: This is the email that was sent to all 60 Next Steps supervisors by the Next Steps Career Development Team.

Appendix B: Survey sent to Next Steps at Vanderbilt supervisors

This section focuses on your experiences of having a Next Steps VU Intern:

- 1) How many interns have you had through Next Steps VU?
- 2) What have been the most significant benefits of having Next Steps VU intern(s)?
- 3) What have been the most significant challenges to workplace success that your Next Steps VU intern(s) has encountered?
- 4) Overall, how satisfied are you with your VU Next Steps intern(s)?
 - _____ Very satisfied
 - _____ Somewhat satisfied
 - _____ Neutral
 - _____ Somewhat dissatisfied
 - _____ Very dissatisfied

Please elaborate on your response:

- 5) If your workplace is no longer serving as a Next Steps internship site, please explain why:

This section focuses on your experience of hiring a permanent employee through Next Steps

- 6) Have you hired a permanent employee through Next Steps after their internship?
 - _____ Yes
 - _____ No (skip to question #9)
- 7) Overall, how satisfied are you (or were you) with the permanent employee you hired through VU Next Steps?
 - _____ Very satisfied
 - _____ Somewhat satisfied
 - _____ Neutral
 - _____ Somewhat dissatisfied
 - _____ Very dissatisfied

Please elaborate on your response:

- 8) If your permanent employee hired through VU Next Steps no longer works at your job site, please explain why not:

This section focuses on the support from VU Next Steps staff

9) Which of the following supports you received from VU Next Steps staff did you find helpful (check all that apply):

- _____ Job development
- _____ Disability awareness training
- _____ Staff orientation on specific intern's characteristics
- _____ Supervisor manual
- _____ Opportunities to provide feedback to Project Next Steps
- _____ Support for supervisor and/or coworkers on how to work with intern
- _____ Job coach support in training intern to complete work tasks
- _____ Job coach support in developing a schedule and/or checklist of tasks to be performed —
- _____ Job coach training in appropriate workplace behaviors
- _____ Regular check-ins
- _____ Trouble-shooting workplace difficulties
- _____ Support in giving disciplinary feedback
- _____ Communication supports
- _____ Other (please describe):

*For the supports you selected, please rank in order of importance.

10) What VU Next Steps services/supports would you like to see more of?

11) Overall, how satisfied were you with the support you received from VU Next Steps?

- _____ Very satisfied
- _____ Somewhat satisfied
- _____ Neutral
- _____ Somewhat dissatisfied
- _____ Very dissatisfied

Please elaborate on your response:

This section focuses on reasons and impact of hiring a VU Next Steps intern

12) What were your main reasons for choosing to participate in hiring a VU Next Steps intern?

- _____ Family member/friend with a disability
- _____ Supervisor suggestion that our department get involved with this program
- _____ Increasing workplace diversity
- _____ Improving workplace morale
- _____ Decreasing staff turnover
- _____ Heard about the program and thought it sounded interesting

_____ Met an intern candidate outside of the office

_____ Other (please describe):

13) Would you consider hiring additional VU Next Steps interns and/or permanent employees in the future?

_____ Yes

_____ No

14) Prior to hiring Next Steps VU interns did you have experience hiring and/or supervising employees with intellectual or learning disabilities?

_____ Yes

_____ No

15) Prior to partnering with Next Steps, which of the following describe concerns you had about hiring/supervising an individual with intellectual or learning disabilities?

_____ Lack of support from the job coach

_____ Safety concerns

_____ Quality control problems

_____ Reduced productivity

_____ Negative attitudes of co-workers

_____ Potential behavior problems or motivational problems

_____ Poor customer service skills

_____ Other (please elaborate):

_____ None of the above

16) How well did VU Next Steps address your original concerns about hiring/supervising an employee with intellectual or learning disabilities?

_____ Very well

_____ Somewhat well

_____ Neutral

_____ Somewhat poorly

_____ Very poorly

Please elaborate on your response:

Note: This is the survey that was sent to all Next Steps supervisors in May 2021.

Appendix C: List of organizations who responded

Vanderbilt University
Metro Gov't of Nashville & Davidson County
The Dog Spot
Nashville Sports Leagues
Turner Family Center for Social Ventures at Vanderbilt Owen Graduate School of Management
Science and Engineering Library
Mama Lere Hearing School at Vanderbilt Bill Wilkerson Center
Saint Ann School
Vanderbilt Health
The John P. Holt Brentwood Library
Empower Tennessee
Vanderbilt Student Communications
The Landscape Podcast
Young Life
Vanderbilt University Office of Conferences
Vanderbilt University Theatre Department Costume Shop
TennCare-LTSS
Metro Nashville Government
St. Luke's Community House
The Store/Heaven South Inc.
Susan Gray School

Note: The organizations are listed by the order of survey response received.

Appendix D: Next Steps Promotional Flyer

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY NEXT STEPS INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

Embrace Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage

"Hosting Next Steps interns has provided the opportunity for both staff and students to learn together, plan and execute important projects with inclusion and learning as primary goals."

DO establish a point person to serve as the coordinator for this role.



"The Next Steps coaches greatly set our intern up for success and prepared him well for weekly tasks. He was well prepared and really added to the events he helped serve in."

DO lean into the resources the VU Next Steps Career Development Team provides. They will provide the tools for onboarding, support and overall success, just ask!

"The Next Steps students work best with a daily consistent routine and checklists. Providing activities in which the Next Steps students can be as independent as possible and as successful as possible is ideal."

DO consider offering alternatives to a traditional job interview. Ask the student to come for a visit before agreeing to host, understand their interests and once hired develop a learning plan with structured weekly check ins.



For more resources on building a neurodiverse talent pool,
contact Megan.Macon@vanderbilt.edu & visit our site at
<https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/departments/nextsteps/contactus/staff.php>

Appendix E: Next Steps Promotional Brochure

Exploring the Impact College-Age Interns with Intellectual Disability Have on Employers Who Host Them



Next Steps at Vanderbilt | nextsteps@vanderbilt.edu | 615-322-3978 | vu.edu/nextsteps



@NextStepsatVanderbilt



@nextstepsatvanderbilt

Table of Contents

Abstract
Background
Research Methodology
Benefits to Hosting
Workplace Culture Change
Valuable Supports
Advice to Prospective Employers
Why Employers Host
Conclusion
Appendix

Abstract

As of 2018, approximately 60 inclusive employers had hosted Next Steps at VU students. The goal of the program is to continue to refine these relationships in support of student internship participation. 35% of the supervisors responded to a survey to collect data on benefits, supports, and challenges associated with hosting Next Steps at VU interns.

The employers who responded saw Next Steps at VU interns as genuine assets for creating a culture of inclusivity and enhancing their overall organizational performance. The findings indicate that Next Steps at VU staff has found a formula to successfully integrate students into their internship opportunities with the support of a job coach. The findings expand on how Next Steps at VU has created a program that leads to creating meaningful employment for the interns and positive outcomes on the organizations who support them.

The sample was composed of 9 Vanderbilt employers and 12 off campus employers. The employers were from diverse industries and had varying experiences with hosting Next Steps at VU interns. 10/21 employers hosted only one intern, and the most experienced organization hosted over 10. In terms of industry, "Education and Training" and "Human Services" were the most prominent sectors.

Background



The Program

Next Steps at VU launched in 2010 for college-aged students with intellectual disability to apply for an inclusive higher education program, including built in internship opportunities. As of 2018, approximately 60 inclusive employers have hosted Next Steps at VU students. The goal is to continue to expand relationships and increase career development and internship opportunities for Next Steps at VU students.

Unique Internship Opportunities

Next Steps at VU students are placed as interns within organizations where they have ongoing, sometimes daily, supervisor interactions for semester-long work experiences. The supervisors that host Next Steps at VU students have an initial meeting with the Employment Director and ongoing check-in points throughout the semester. *The role of an internship supervisor is to guide the students to refine career goals, develop transferable job skills, and gain employability.*

Additionally, the interns have job coaches who help them stay organized, prepare for their work, and develop professional skills. The job coach communicates between Vanderbilt and the employer, catering to the needs of both the student and organization. *Job coaches are an integral component to success and their work drives the program forward.*

Research Methodology

Supporting Program Growth

The purpose of this report is to provide data to support expansion and involvement of employer networks who seek to host future Next Steps interns. The findings highlight the experiences of supervisors who have hosted Next Steps interns. The testimonies provide the Next Steps Career Development team data to think creatively about program growth in the community. The supervisor feedback can also be used as a guide for developing new resources and supports for employers who express interest in hosting future interns.

Design

A total of 21 employers who hosted the Next Steps at VU students answered an electronic survey on their experiences. Employers were asked a variety of open-ended questions and other rating questions (i.e. on a scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree). A codebook was created to thematically categorize subjective responses after survey results were obtained. Subsequent graphs were created by counting the number of times a response category was mentioned in the answers. Below are the specific questions employers were asked:

- What have been the most significant benefits of having Next Steps at Vanderbilt intern(s)?
- What have been the most significant challenges to workplace success that your Next Steps at Vanderbilt intern(s) have encountered?
- Overall, how satisfied are you with your Next Steps at Vanderbilt intern(s)?
 - Please elaborate on your response to the above question: Overall, how satisfied are you with your Next Steps at Vanderbilt intern(s)?
- If your workplace is no longer serving as a Next Steps at Vanderbilt Internship site, please explain why.
- Have you hired a permanent employee through Next Steps at Vanderbilt post internship?
 - Overall, how satisfied are you (or were you) with the permanent employee you hired through Next Steps at Vanderbilt?
 - If your permanent employee hired through Next Steps at Vanderbilt no longer works at your job site, please explain why not.

- Which of the following supports you received from Next Steps at Vanderbilt staff did you find helpful (check all that apply):
 - For the supports you selected above, please list the three that were most helpful in making the internship a successful experience.
- What Next Steps at Vanderbilt services/supports would you like to see more of?
- Overall, how satisfied were you with the support you received from Next Steps at Vanderbilt?
 - Please elaborate on your response to the above question: Overall, how satisfied were you with the support you received from Next Steps at Vanderbilt?
- What were your main reasons for choosing to participate in hosting a Next Steps at Vanderbilt intern?
- Would you consider hosting additional Next Steps at Vanderbilt interns and/or hiring them as permanent employees in the future?
- Prior to hosting Next Steps at Vanderbilt interns did you have experience hosting and/or supervising employees with intellectual disability?
- Prior to partnering with Next Steps at Vanderbilt, which of the following describe concerns you have had about hosting/supervising individuals with intellectual disability?
- How well did Next Steps at Vanderbilt address your original concerns about hosting/supervising an employee with intellectual disability?
 - Please elaborate on your response to the above question: How well did Next Steps at Vanderbilt address your original concerns about hiring/supervising an employee with intellectual or learning disability?
- How has hosting a student enrolled through Next Steps at Vanderbilt changed your workplace culture?
- Finally, do you have tips or advice for new sites that might be on the considering hosting Next Steps at Vanderbilt interns?

The Sample

The sample was comprised of 9 Vanderbilt employers and 12 external employers. The employers were from a variety of industries and varying experiences with hosting interns. 10/21 employers hosted only one intern, and the most experienced organization hosted over 10. In terms of industry, "Education and Training" and "Human Services" were the most prominent sectors.

Figure 1: Industry Distribution of Next Steps Employers

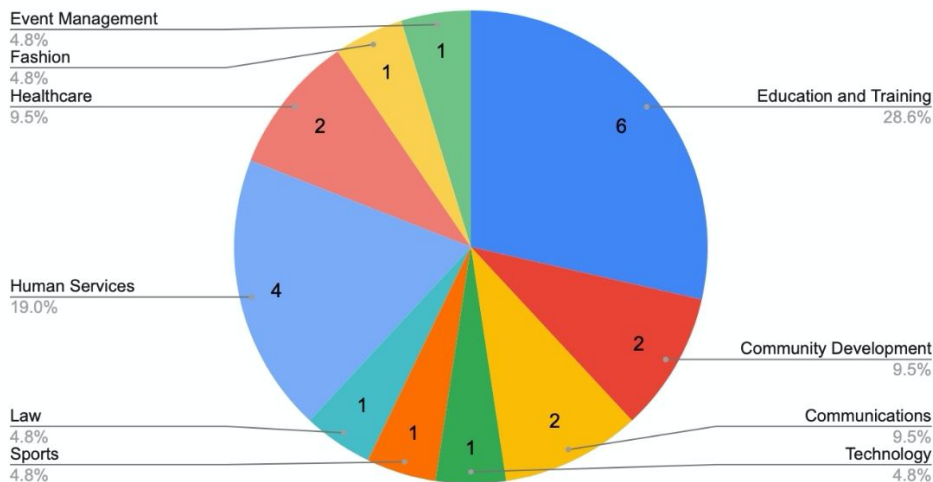
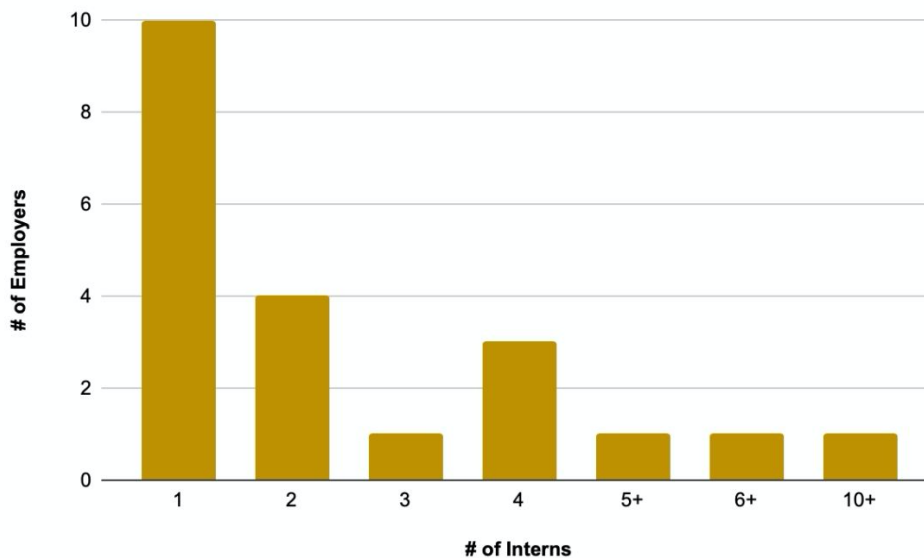


Figure 2: Employer History with Hosting Next Steps Interns



The Codebook

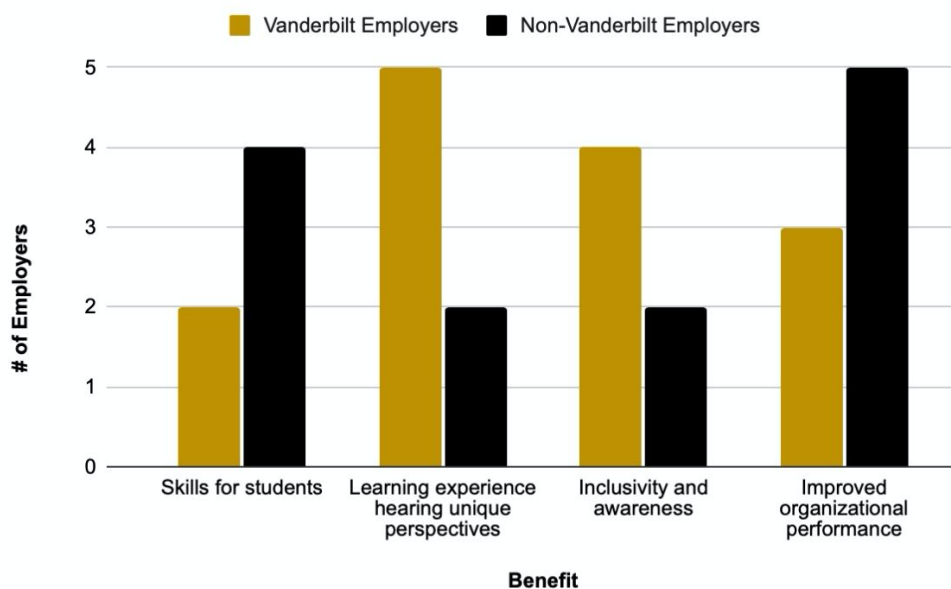
In order to organize open-ended survey responses, a codebook was created. For each open-ended question, prominent themes were identified. For the “What have been the most significant benefits of having Next Steps at Vanderbilt intern(s)?” the codebook was as follows:

BENE (Benefits)	1 - Skills for students
	2 - Learning experience hearing unique perspectives
	3 - Inclusivity and awareness
	4 - Improved organizational performance

Once themes were identified, each question response was given a value, similar to the above figure, and organized. For example, “What have been the most significant benefits of having Next Steps at Vanderbilt intern(s)?” The theme “Skill development for students” was assigned the value of 1, and responses were manually given the corresponding value. For this particular question, there were 3 other themes and subsequent values, with responses being categorized accordingly. After giving each response a value, graphs were created to understand the trends in responses.

Benefits to Hosting

Figure 3: Benefits of Hosting Next Steps at VU Students



There was a wide range of benefits experienced by employers who hosted Next Steps at VU interns. Employer experiences were linked to the individual students they hosted and the work tasks assigned. The themes that emerged across all responses included awareness around inclusivity, skill development for the students they hosted, learning experiences that resulted from hearing unique perspectives, and overall improved organizational performance.

"I think having Next Steps interns has allowed the Vanderbilt students to work with their peers with intellectual disabilities, which will, I assume, help to prepare them to work with people with intellectual disabilities in future workplaces, so we are actually providing an educational experience for everyone" - **Employer Response**

Skills for Students

The development of skills for students highlights the reciprocal relationship that is experienced when hosting interns with intellectual disabilities. One of the clear benefits of the program is the skill development provided to students, and the subsequent gratification that employers felt.

"Having an intern from Next Steps benefits everyone- the community, the staff, and the intern. Staff has observed much growth in the interns' workplace, communication, and workplace skills during the course of the internship. It is very gratifying to foster an environment that supports the interns." - **Employer Response**

This skill development and subsequent sense of fulfillment that employers felt highlight student growth during these experiences. With this development, interns will be able to pursue future opportunities and develop independence in the workplace.

Inclusivity and Awareness

Inclusivity and awareness are both integral components of the workplace. A 2018 Center for Inclusion and Citizenship Report found that employers who hired individuals with intellectual disabilities lead to a more positive workplace environment, better business, and greater employer job satisfaction ([Center for Inclusive Excellence, 2018](#)). Next Steps internship supervisors reported similar benefits.

"Hosting Next Steps interns has provided the opportunity for both staff and students to learn together, plan and execute important projects with inclusion and learning as primary goals." - **Employer Response**

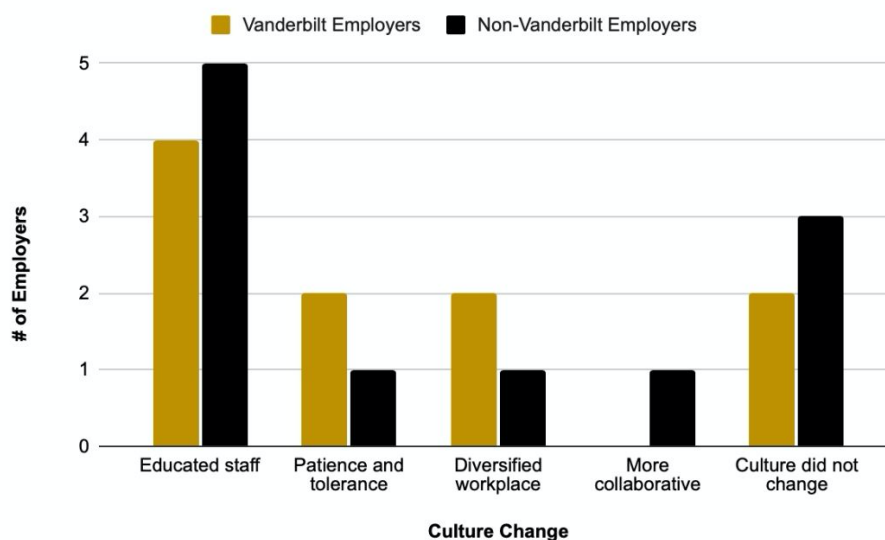
By interacting daily with these students, employers felt like the workplace was more inclusive because they became aware of the student's perspectives. As a result, employers were more cognizant and understanding of the needs of these students. This heightened awareness is something that will make further experiences with individuals with intellectual disabilities more beneficial for all. By having this awareness, employers may also be inclined to host more individuals with ID in the future and as a result hire them for full time employment.

Improved Organizational Performance

Another common theme was that employers felt interns improved organizational performance with their work. Not only were interns developing skills, teaching employees, and heightening inclusivity, but their work made significant contributions to the organizations they were a part of. This is a clear example to demonstrate that individuals with ID make a significant impact on an organization's work.

Workplace Culture Change

Figure 4: Impact on Culture



"I think we are more tolerant in general and have learned to work more collaboratively" -
Employer Response

Culture change was the most impactful change across all industries and responses. When employers hosted students, their organization's were exposed to this diverse, underrepresented population. In return, they created a culture that embraced a more inclusive workspace for their own colleagues. An important finding is that employees now would be more inclined to hire employees with ID and be better prepared to set them up for success.

Education

By collaborating with these students daily, employees were made aware of the need to provide individuals with ID opportunities in the workplace. Based on the responses, the continued collaboration with students provided an ongoing learning experience for employers. Moving forward, employers can take the lessons they learned to foster success for individuals with ID. Multiple times employers highlighted that not only were they teaching students professional skills, but they were also learning from the students every step of the way.

"My students who work with me, myself and our patrons gained so many learning skills from our Next Steps experience.

The idea of learning from them is what we loved most."

- Employer Response

"Our intern brought smiles, and happiness to the team. He also gave us great teaching moments that not only improved his skill sets, but mine as well. That is extremely valuable to us."

- Employer Response

Diversified Workplace

Welcoming Next Steps at VU students resulted in a heightened awareness of the value of diversity in the workplace. This insight will open doors for additional experiences for individuals with ID. The increased awareness will cause employers to be more willing to host individuals with ID as interns in the future.

"I believe it made my staff more sensitive to the needs of all individuals, regardless of disability, that enable them to feel like they have meaningfully and purposefully contributed to the workforce."

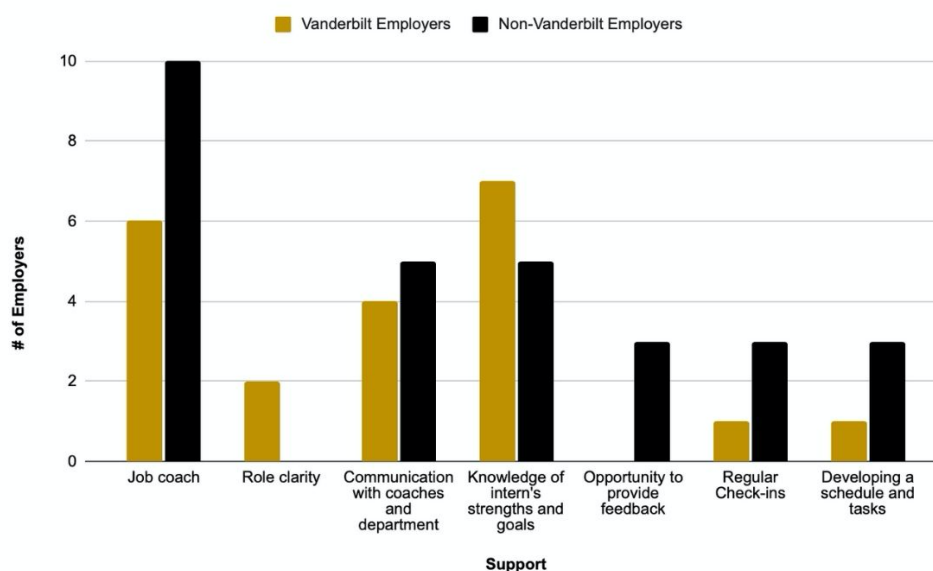
- Employer Response

"We have worked across departments at [the site] to 'share' Next Steps interns. The opportunity to collaborate on projects has created opportunity for staff to connect in ways that we would not traditionally, and invited important conversations about ability and inclusion."

- Employer Response

Valuable Supports

Figure 5: Most Valuable Supports Next Steps Offered (top three from each employer)



The survey asked employers to rank the top three most valuable supports provided by Next Steps at VU staff. Figure 5 maps out how many times a support was mentioned within a top three list. The most common theme observed was that a job coach was integral to success.

"The support interns receive through Vanderbilt is a recipe for success."

- Employer Response

"I could not overstate how important the job coaching and support has been pivotal to our intern success and support for our staff to address key issues."

- Employer Response

"The support has been phenomenal and that has made this relationship all the more while." - Employer Response

Job coaches guide the student through the internship experience, lessening pressure on employers, while maintaining a keen focus on continued improvement and development. Each Next Steps at VU intern brings a unique skill set to their internships and the job coach works with the employer to tailor the work experience in a way that enhances the gifts they bring to the organization.

Job Coach

The job coach brings great value by serving as a liaison between the student and employer. They aid the preparation, training, accountability, and learning goal success of the student. The Next Steps at VU student is then able to develop a timeline to transition to working independently with the assistance of the job coach. By learning how to prepare and stay organized, students are able to learn and apply best practices for future employability.

"The Next Steps coaches greatly set our intern up for success and prepared him well for weekly tasks. He was well prepared and really added to the events he helped serve in." - **Employer**

Response

"I felt the interns were supported well by their job coach and the program, and that we were supported by the interns, job coaches and program coordinators. It really feels like a team effort and I love that energy!" - **Employer Response**

Knowledge of the Students

The survey revealed the importance of understanding the strengths, weaknesses, and interests of each Next Steps at VU intern. This allowed employees to individually design the job role to the learning goals the student communicates. Designing learning goals allowed the employer to give constructive feedback on areas for growth and empower their interns to build employability skills.

"It could be helpful to know how the intern wants to grow and what they want to experience and be developed in through their internship. It'd help an employer better cater responsibilities, constructive feedback, and evaluations." -

Employer Response

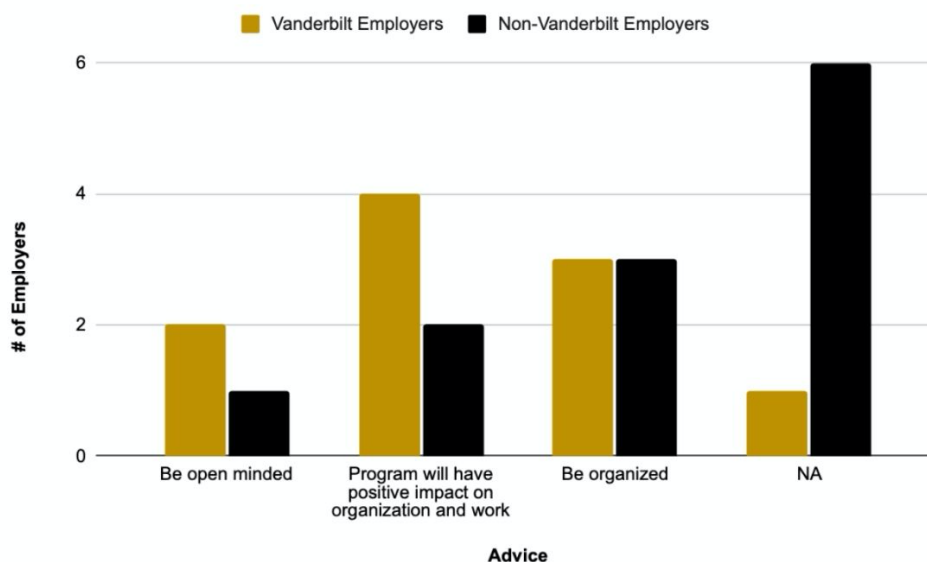
"The biggest challenges I have found are trying to find where exactly an intern's interests lay. I always want the work that I do with interns to reflect them and their individuality, but it can be hard to get them to express themselves in that way when the concepts and tools we work with are often so new to them." -

Employer Response

Advice to Prospective Employers

Employers

Figure 6: Advice to Prospective Employers Considering Hosting Next Steps Interns



Supervisors shared that staying organized was crucial for success. For example, creating learning goals, using visuals for scheduling, and setting ongoing check-in time for giving feedback were all highlighted as helpful tools. Keeping an open mindset was important for the student and employer. Above all else, the survey results demonstrate it is clear that having a Next Steps at VU intern will have an incredible impact on an organization's work and understanding around the value of inclusivity and diversity.

Organization

Organization was a common theme when discussing advice for prospective employers. By having a clear schedule and defined goals, interns were able to follow a routine and excel at their work. The organized environment also allowed interns to exhibit independence in completing their outlined work. Independence was fostered by having clear communication with Vanderbilt and proactive planning on the organization's part. This structure, according to employers, made the intern experience more rewarding for both the students and employers.

"The next Steps students work best with a daily consistent routine and checklists. Providing activities in which the Next Steps students can be as independent as possible and as successful as possible is ideal." -
Employer Response

Open-Minded

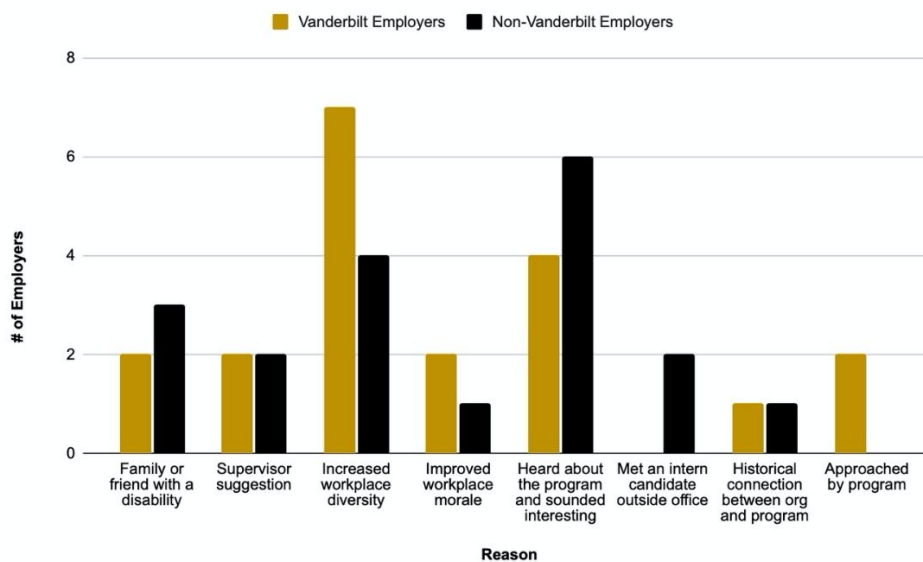
Employers expressed the importance of keeping an open mind when deciding to participate in the program. One small way to achieve this is to encourage colleagues to share personal stories of how intellectual disability may have impacted their own lives. These stories create a company culture that feels comfortable talking about questions they may have about working with colleagues who have intellectual disability.

"Go into it with an open mind because you are bound to learn from them just as much as they may learn from you." -
Employer Response

Why Did Employers Host?

The most popular reason supervisors agreed to host Next Steps interns was to support workplace diversity initiatives. In the future, by learning about the value of hosting from hearing others in the community share their experiences, employers would be more likely to host. This data has the potential to expand participation by publicizing the benefits of hosting Next Step interns and incentivize referrals by current supervisors.

Figure 7: Reasons Employers Hosted Next Steps Students



Conclusion

The purpose of this report is to provide data that drives the expansion and involvement of employer networks who seek to host future Next Steps interns. The findings highlight the experiences of supervisors who have hosted Next Steps interns. The testimonies provide the Next Steps Career Development team data to think creatively about program growth in the community. The supervisor feedback can also be used as a guide for developing new resources and supports for employers who express interest in hosting future interns.

The research also highlights the successful approach that Vanderbilt has taken with Next Steps. The model they have built that emphasizes communication and organization allows students with intellectual disability internships that encourage independence and professional development. If you are interested in hosting a Next Steps intern please contact the the Director of Next Steps Career Development, Megan Macon at megan.macon@vanderbilt.edu.

Learn more about Next Steps Vanderbilt by visiting
<https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/departments/nextsteps/programoverview/careerdevelopment.php>

Appendix – Testimonials

Marcus Hayes, Director of Pre School Programs at Mama Lere Bill Wilkerson School of Vanderbilt

Involvement

Marcus was the former Director of Special Education at Metro Schools. He also conducted his Masters at Peabody and had past experiences growing a program out that supported high school students with ID. Thus, Next Steps at Vanderbilt aligned well with his early experiences.

Positive Experiences

Marcus' intern came on site for a job shadow program. The intern was interested in child care so it was an excellent fit. According to Marcus, the intern really bought into the program and engaged with daily tasks. On one occasion, Marcus recalls his intern on the playground facilitating dialogue and giving the kids feedback. He said that she jumped right into class, and engaged in a teaching role right away.

Helpful Supports

Like most employers, Marcus emphasized the importance of the job coach. Bringing in a team was integral to success, with buy-in from the Next Steps staff facilitating success. Marcus communicated often with the job coach, while orienting them towards the site with tours. Throughout the process, Marcus relied on the job coach for assistance and found that their role as an advocate for the student made the process beneficial for both parties.

Additional Tips

Marcus keenly focused on creating a purpose for his intern. Marcus says that by making the tasks he assigned meaningful, he was able to create a sense of self-worth for his intern. For any employers interested in participating, Marcus suggests that making the intern a contributing member to the mission of the organization makes the experience fulfilling.

Jasmine Ledsinger, Program Coordinator at The Store

Involvement

Jasmine previously held roles at DCS and Child Protective Services. The Store opened in March of 2020 and the organization took in its first Next Steps at VU intern in August of 2020.

Times of Change

The Store had to shift its business model immediately after opening due to the pandemic. The organization provides free groceries to about 400 households a week, and pivoted to curbside pickups at the start of the pandemic. The Store's Nexts Steps at VU intern came into the organization whilst these business model changes were occurring.

Onboarding

Jasmine emphasized onboarding as an integral component to success during the program. The first aspect of onboarding was initial conversations with the intern and VU representative to set expectations for the experience. After this initial conversation, Jasmine focused on hands-on training. The staff taught the intern workplace conduct, such as start time, end time, and the phone policy, and demonstrated daily tasks.

Supports

Like most employers, Jasmine felt that the job coach was most helpful. She said that the collaboration and support from the job coach was integral to success.

Additional Tips

Jasmine provided many tips for prospective employers. First, she advocated for supporting curiosity while maintaining safety. Curiosity can facilitate motivation, which makes the experience rich for the intern. Additionally, consistent communication with the VU staff and the intern can set clear expectations, while working around some of the verbal challenges faced. Finally, having a job description that matched the intern's skill set made the experience run much smoother.

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figures

1. Figure of Title Page shared by Next Steps Career Development Team
2. Darko + Chelsea taken by Kristen Tompkins
3. Darko + Christine taken by Kristen Tompkins
4. Annabi + Lebovitz OIMIB Created by Kristen Tompkins
5. Responses by industry/employers Created by Kristen Tompkins
6. Respondents who hosted NS interns Created by Kristen Tompkins
7. Benefits Created by Kristen Tompkins
8. Respondents share impact on culture Created by Kristen Tompkins
9. Most valuable supports by staff Created by Kristen Tompkins
10. Challenges to hosting interns Created by Kristen Tompkins
11. Advice for employers Created by Kristen Tompkins
12. Reason for hosting Created by Kristen Tompkins

Tables

1. NS overview Created by Kristen Tompkins
2. OIMIB at NS Created by Kristen Tompkins
3. Supervisor narratives Created by Kristen Tompkins
4. Response to culture change Created by Kristen Tompkins
5. Assets for support Created by Kristen Tompkins
6. Response to challenges Created by Kristen Tompkins
7. Share advice Created by Kristen Tompkins
8. Recommendations created by Kristen Tompkins