

The Benefits of Volunteering after an Acquired Brain Injury

By Lisa A. Carulli, MS, CRC

I started working for the Acquired Brain Injury Program (ABI) at Mesa College in March of '98. When I started the position, there was a need for a Vocational Coordinator and Instructor to assist students with acquired brain injuries in locating and maintaining both volunteer and competitive employment.

After completing several of the core classes of the ABI program, students are encouraged to look toward future and to begin transitioning "back" into their lives after an ABI. In the course entitled "Leadership" students are assisted in obtaining a volunteer position in the community. There are a few rules in the leadership class that act as guidelines for the students to follow:

- 1) Get a volunteer position doing something you love. As volunteering generally means working without monetary compensation, I find that students will be more likely to show up for work if they are motivated and doing something they enjoy doing. They will feel like they are providing a valuable contribution to the community.
- 2) Volunteer at a place that is easy for you to get to. Transportation is usually a big issue after a brain injury. Often times, students will lose their drivers' license due to the nature of the brain injury. It is important that the students feel independent and not have to ask caretakers or family members for rides to and from the volunteer site.
- 3) Start out slow, no more than a couple hours per day or week. Along with brain injuries, we tend to see heightened impulsivity, students will sometimes take on more than they can handle and can become easily overwhelmed. I suggest that students start out with a very minimum amount of hours and then gradually increase them, as they become more proficient and learn more about the job.
- 4) Tour the volunteer work site and meet the supervisor before agreeing to be a volunteer. I encourage students to tour all potential volunteer sites before agreeing to any volunteer work, as they should be well informed about the organization before they decide they would like to work there.

A typical volunteer position usually is with a non-profit organization, but is not a rule for volunteering. If a student decides they would like to donate their time at a for-profit organization, I think it should be a volunteer situation, with a possibility for a paid employment in the future or for some other type of compensation for their efforts. I suggest carefully screening a volunteer situation at a for-profit organization to ensure the worker is not being taken advantage of.

In the Leadership class, I work with students by helping them to identify their vocational strengths, interests and abilities. The curriculum is designed in such a way that the students are able to look realistically at themselves in relation to the "world of work". They see what their strong points are and how those strong points can be maximized in a volunteer employment setting. Often times, a student will have a revelation during the class that they may never return to their old jobs after a brain injury. I encourage them to process the grief of losing their jobs, and to use that grief as a motivator in finding something else that they love to do and are good at.

Often times ABI students may be considering returning to work after a brain injury. In most cases I would encourage them to start out volunteering first, so they can be provided with valuable insight with regard to their own work tolerances, employer needs and standard work practices. I feel that volunteering can be seen as a "stepping stone" back into the world of work. Volunteering builds their self-awareness and self-confidence as they begin to focus their abilities, rather than their limitations.

Another aspect of the class is the Leadership Project. Every week a volunteer job is featured. The volunteer jobs are non-profit organizations, which are open to hiring volunteers with disabilities.

In class, we discuss the type of population it serves, the nature of the work, and how to apply for the job. From these weekly job announcements, students are encouraged to contact the volunteer site of their choice and set up an interview to talk to the supervisor of the facility. After contacting the volunteer site, they present their information to the leadership class. Whether a student chooses to work at that particular site or not, they learn a lot from this experience because it provides them with valuable insight about the “world of work”, while teaching them how to communicate to potential employers.

The following are just a few things the students had to say about the benefits of volunteering:

Dennis Sullivan writes: “Volunteering at St. Vincent de Paul is a family of 65 volunteers who work together. I work sorting material, moving things, placing clothes, and help people unload.”

Mary Reeves writes: “I volunteer at a school, reading to kindergarten classes. I feel good about volunteering, it helps to get me back in the main stream. I have a set place to go. I’ve learned what I still need to work on before I’m ready to go back to a pay position.”

Nancy Moore writes: I volunteer to teach English in a free class. My class is entirely people from Mexico. I love it--I learn about what they’re dealing with and its such fun getting to know them. I even bought a Mexico map to learn where each is from.”

Jack T. writes” It makes you feel good about your self. It’s something to do. It teaches time management and organization.”

Robert T. writes “ I do dishwashing at a church. I like helping people I like.”

Carlos Santana writes” I felt great getting out and actually helping others. I learned that helping others is very satisfying.”

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