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Willing and Able Mentoring (WAM) Program: A Vital Step

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ABSTRACT

The WAM program started as a partnership venture between Deakin University and the University of Melbourne. WAM is now offered nationally through partnerships with Regional Disability Liaison Units, university disability and careers services, and employer contacts such as Diversity at Work Australia Inc., Employers Making a Difference Inc., and the Graduate Careers Council of Australia (GCCA).

Students from Australian tertiary institutions, who are registered with their disability support service, have the opportunity to participate in the WAM program, which focuses on the vital first steps into the world of work.

The program was developed as a potential strategy to address the experience of many students who have a disability, who, despite being equally qualified, are disadvantaged in graduate recruitment and other transition to work opportunities. This is due to negative self-concepts, stereotypes, and community attitudes about their potential, compared to other students.

The WAM program is a series of semi-structured discussion meetings between a student and a mentor in a career area of interest to the student. Mentors and mentees are provided with program manuals, orientation, support during the program, and debriefing after the program.

WAM is coordinated and evaluated as the focus of Kevin Murfitt's PHD research. Kevin and Jenny Shaw, whose initiative contributed to the inception of WAM, will present a profile on WAM, focusing on 2002 the first year as a national program. Future issues and plans will also be canvassed.

WAM was piloted in Victoria in 2000 and 2001 and if the wildly positive feedback is an indication of what is in store for national participants, your involvement will bring benefits well beyond just the student's participation.



1. INTRODUCTION

After successful piloting in Victoria in 2000 and 2001, for further details go to

<http://www.gcca.edu.au/wam.htm>

Willing and Able Mentoring (WAM) Program has 60 tertiary students who have a disability in this first year of the National WAM Program.

Tasmania, Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory, and Queensland are represented with Western Australia ready to participate in 2003.

2. METHOD

The students are recruited via advertising through networks such as the Regional Disability Liaison Officer group, Austed List serve, individual Disability Liaison Officers and Careers Personnel, and via the WAM web site. Students complete a comprehensive application form and submit their application to Kevin Murfitt, who is coordinating the program with the guidance of the WAM Steering committee. The steering committee is made up of Disability Liaison Officers and tertiary Careers Personnel.

Partner employment specialist organizations in the respective States such as Diversity at Work Australia Inc., Employers Making a Difference (EMAD) Inc., and in some cases Regional Disability Liaison Officers, then recruit appropriate mentors for students in that State.

Mentors are individually briefed and surveyed for Kevin's research prior to commencing the program, and students attend a training day held in each State during July.

The mentoring sessions run through August-October, and a debriefing/certificate presentation day completes the program in November for all participants.

A comprehensive program manual is provided to each mentor/mentee, which provides participants with background information about mentoring and suggested discussion/activity topics for each mentoring session.

Activities suggested in the program include: a tour of the workplace, attending a staff meeting, discussing workplace modifications, discussing disclosure of disability, practice interviews, and development of networks and CV.

3. RESULTS

Results will be reported at Pathways 2002, and will be posted on the WAM web site in December 2002

4. DISCUSSION

WAM is a good example of collaboration on a national level. This collaboration enables important initiatives such as mentoring to be made available in a consistent way to students who have a disability across Australia. The partnerships formed and networks established through WAM Program will bring other benefits including greater awareness of the work being undertaken in the sector, valuable links with other programs being developed by partners, and a structure which may facilitate national adoption of new strategies and programs.

WAM is also unique in that the program is the centrepiece of Kevin Murfitt's PHD research into MENTORING AND EMPLOYMENT OF GRADUATES WHO HAVE A DISABILITY. This will give WAM more exposure in conferences, papers, and other presentations, as well as empirical evidence of the value of WAM and mentoring initiatives in general for people who have a disability.

After establishing and refining the program in 2002 and 2003, WAM will be able to be embedded into individual institutional program offerings for students who have a disability. The WAM web site will have the capacity for "on-line" application processes, a data base of employer organizations supporting WAM, ability to register new mentor-mentee matches

from anywhere, download the briefing material, manual, and other associated material, and an area to submit feedback for ongoing program development.

WAM's success is in its simplicity. Partners get great benefits in terms of positive transition experiences for their students, or enhanced awareness of the potential of students who have a disability for mentor organizations. WAM is becoming recognized internationally as an innovative program for people who have a disability, and as a collaborative initiative, brings a positive profile to our sector in general which will assist us as we aim to give students who have a disability equity no matter where they are or what their disability is.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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