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PROMISING PRACTICES



College-level program launches careers and community integration

Like young people everywhere, a man with an intellectual disability was eager for his life to unfold when he was graduated from high school in 2008. His dream was to attend college—not just any college, but the University of Arkansas, “The Razorback Nation.”

To help the young man realize his dream, his mother asked [Life Styles, Inc.](#) for assistance. Life Styles provides community services for individuals with disabilities in the Fayetteville (home of the University of Arkansas) and Springdale, Arkansas, areas.

The mother’s request sparked the formation of Launch. The goal of the program was to provide academic coursework that would address independent living skills and social skills in place of the typical college curriculum and provide an opportunity for students to feel they truly become a part of the university life.

Students enrolled in the three-year Launch program enjoy all of the trappings of a University of Arkansas experience. They have school IDs, ride the Razorback Transit busses, attend classes on campus, eat at the Arkansas Union, and exercise at the campus gym. Their classroom studies focus on developing independent living skills, developing social skills and relationships, and continuing their education. The Launch students, or *Launchers* as they are called, learn skills so that they can ride public transit to and from school (and eventually their place of employment) and interact appropriately with their peers and coworkers. These skills help Launchers maintain safe and healthy homes, feel

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About the ECS Promising Practices newsletter series

An organization receiving exemplary recognition in its CARF survey report stands out because of its professional and strategic response to a service or business need. CARF presents these ECS Promising Practices articles to encourage dialogue among service providers and to offer examples of creative solutions for improving service quality.

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Issues are categorized by topic: Business Practices, Community Services, and Employment Services.

confident navigating in the community, and participate in a number of social events of their choosing.

In addition to attending classes and participating in campus activities, Launchers are paired with university student mentors during the first semester. The mentors introduce Launchers to what a day in the life of a college student is like.

Often, the mentors continue their friendships with the Launchers past their initial term. One mentor who volunteered with the Launch program in 2008 still meets monthly with her assigned Launcher.

These lasting relationships were not part of the original concept for Launch, but they have become so important in the lives of both Launchers and mentors that they are now considered an integral part of the program.

Launchers also strengthen their pre-employment skills through internships. These internships might be helping the university's track and field or basketball teams, assisting the Razorback Marching Band, volunteering at local food pantries or retirement communities, or being a classroom assistant.

The final year of Launch focuses on fine-tuning students' employment skills and exploring intensive training programs or supported employment options.

In 2012, the first graduating class of Launchers celebrated its success with friends, family members, the dean of the Department of Education and Health Professions, and the chancellor of the university. A year later, 85 percent of the students had found work or continued their educational studies.

Since its beginnings five years ago, Launch has grown tremendously because of its value. A recent [CARF](#) survey report commended the program, "Families from across the country have relocated their sons and daughters to Arkansas for this unique experience. They describe it as a dream come true and an opportunity for their children to grow up, live independently, and be productive members of society, an opportunity not readily available to persons with disabilities."

For more information, contact Jennifer Maynard, executive director, Life Styles, Inc., at jmaynard@lifestylesinc.org or (479) 521-3581, extension 150. The Life Styles website is at www.lifestylesinc.org.



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