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Opportunity Partners and Arc Greater Twin Cities team up with Dunwoody College for new retail training program

At a time when nonprofits are facing budget cuts and trying to do more with less, three Twin Cities nonprofits have embarked on a creative, new retail training collaboration to boost job opportunities and greater independence for people with disabilities. The program joins Opportunity Partners and Arc Greater Twin Cities as educational partners, with curriculum from Dunwoody College of Technology.

The certified training program is designed around existing jobs and employer needs, and developed into course curriculum by Dunwoody's Custom Training & Continuing Education department. Opportunity Partners adapts the curriculum to be delivered to students with disabilities, and Arc's Value Village Thrift Store & Donation Center serves as the training site. Currently, five students (ages 18-21) are taking part in the pilot program. Once they graduate from the five-week program, they will earn a joint certificate from Opportunity Partners and Dunwoody College.

The need for increased employment opportunities for people with disabilities is great, as illustrated in an eye-opening national study by The Arc.

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According to *Still in the Shadows with Their Future Uncertain*, a report on Family and Individual Needs for Disability Supports (FINDS) issued by The Arc in June 2011:

- Once it was assumed people with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities couldn't work. In 1988, only 21,000 people with I/DD were participating in supported/competitive employment in the U.S.; by 2006, more than 117,000 people were participating in supported/competitive employment.
- The report conducted online from July 2010 to October 2010 had 4,962 participants. 85 percent of families reported that adult family members with I/DD were not employed, either full-time or part-time.
- Of the 15 percent who said their family member was employed, only 41 percent worked in a regular job in the community, and only just over half of them earn at least minimum wage.

“With our expertise in how people with disabilities learn, Dunwoody’s experience in curriculum development, and the opportunity to use Arc’s Value Village stores for community-based training, we make a dynamic team for people with disabilities who want to train and succeed in employment,” said Opportunity Partners President & CEO George Klauser.

This is the second certified educational track in which Opportunity Partners has collaborated with Dunwoody. The first program, professional cleaning, was launched in 2010.

“We want to raise the bar on employment of people with disabilities,” said Kim Keprios, Chief Executive Officer of Arc Greater Twin Cities. “Having a job opens doors to a better life. Work brings us purpose, greater financial security, and social connections and friendships. We all want to take pride in what we do and in knowing we are contributing to the community.”

Enrollees earn \$7.25 per hour during the training. The pilot covers three levels of retail associate training and on-the-job work experience. Both Opportunity Partners and Arc Greater Twin Cities have raised funds through donations and grants to supplement the cost of the pilot.

Opportunity Partners is a nonprofit organization serving 1,700 people with disabilities annually through employment, training and residential programs. Opportunity Partners – redefining “disability” through advanced learning, deep community support, and meaningful work – proving that everyone, when given the opportunity, adds value to our world. www.OpportunityPartners.org

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Arc Greater Twin Cities is an advocacy organization whose mission is to secure for all people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families the opportunity to realize their goals of where and how they live, learn, work and play. www.Arcgreatertwincities.org

Founded in 1914, **Dunwoody College of Technology** is a private, not-for-profit, endowed institution of higher education. It is one of the few institutions of its kind in the nation, and has been a champion of applied education throughout its history. Its mission is to provide students with a high-quality technical education that results in an immediate job and a fulfilling career. Located in the Lowry Hills neighborhood next to downtown Minneapolis, Dunwoody College offers bachelor's and associate's degrees in a variety of technical fields. It is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. www.dunwoody.edu

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