

# GRAB AND GO PRACTICES

## Work-Based Learning: A Partnership's Example

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### Introduction

—*Maria Paiewonsky*

Research consistently shows that work-based learning is one of the strongest predictors of post-school employment for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) (Carter et al., 2021; Test et al., 2009). These experiences give students the chance to apply classroom learning in real-world settings, develop transferable employment skills, and build networks with potential employers. For practitioners, creating structured, individualized, work-based learning opportunities is a critical step in preparing students for competitive, integrated employment.

***“One of the biggest benefits I’ve seen from work-based learning experiences is that students get to work hands-on. They start to feel more comfortable and are better able to connect with others.”***

– Zachary Chipman, Employment Specialist at Bridgewater State University EXCEL Program

In Massachusetts, the MA Inclusive Postsecondary Education (MAIPSE) partnerships put this research into practice by offering students individualized work-based learning tied directly to their career goals and preferences. The aim is two-fold: 1) to help students identify the types of work that best align with their interests and strengths, and 2) to build employment skills that support long-term success. This brief highlights career development practices from one example—the Bridgewater State University EXCEL programs—that focus on career preparation through both coursework and meaningful work-based experiences.

### Background

Located in southeastern Massachusetts, Bridgewater State University (BSU) is the largest of the nine state universities and ranks among the top ten public and private four-year institutions in the state by enrollment (UnivStats, 2025). The university enrolls nearly 10,000 students, offers more than 100 areas of study, and has 11 residence halls. Its regional significance is underscored by the fact that the campus has its own Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA) commuter rail stop.

Building on this strong foundation, BSU launched its inclusive postsecondary education services in 2011. In collaboration with neighboring school districts, the program provides students with IDD opportunities to engage in person-centered planning, enroll in college courses, and participate in work experiences aligned with their postsecondary goals. The program is supported by a team that includes a director, a community connections and job development specialist, an outcome and curriculum coordinator, an inclusive student life coordinator, an administrative assistant, and several educational coaches arranged by partner school districts or provider agencies. This brief highlights the contributions of the community connections and job development specialist.

### Creating Work-Based Opportunities for Students

At BSU, the community connections and job development specialist plays a key role in developing work-based learning opportunities both on campus and in the surrounding community. This includes collaborating with schools and community provider agencies to coordinate student schedules, arrange job supports, and, at times, assist with transportation. To streamline the process, the university's Human Resources (HR) department

required these placements to be designated as internships rather than jobs, which allowed the program to move forward without additional HR approvals.

## Cultivating Work Opportunities

Establishing these opportunities requires ongoing communication with potential worksites. The community connections and job development specialist had to cultivate strong employer-supervisor relationships. Some of the first steps included sending email inquiries, knocking on doors, and arranging in-person visits. The program and site supervisors develop and customize jobs collaboratively, with regular check-ins and timely follow-up on feedback to ensure student success.

BSU currently offers about 30 campus internship sites in areas such as media and technology, facilities, athletics, dining, the arts, retail, and even a campus-run microgreens business (see Campus Internships at BSU). These sites allow students to build specific skills, gain hands-on experience, and develop problem-solving abilities as they adapt to different responsibilities. For the community connections and job development specialist, the time invested in cultivating these opportunities pays off by allowing work experiences to be individualized to each student's interests and goals. With so many internship sites available, students who are not satisfied with their first work opportunity can explore alternative options.

As the employment specialist for the Bridgewater State University EXCEL Program, Zachary Chipman has used many career interest tools and strategies over the years. Among these, he recommends:

- **Person-Centered Planning** – A collaborative process that focuses on an individual's strengths, preferences, interests, and support needs to guide meaningful career and life goals.
- **O\*NET Interest Profiler** – An online self-assessment that helps individuals identify their interests and explore matching career paths.
- CareerOne Stop **Work Values Matcher** – A tool that helps individuals identify what they value most in a work environment and connect those values to potential occupations.



**Johnny Pham hosts his podcast “Walking in Johnny’s Shoes” with guest speaker at BSU’s Student Technology Engagement**

## The Team Behind Student Success

What makes this work possible is a strong team approach to supporting students. Among the most critical team members are graduate students, who serve as primary leads in communicating with campus internship supervisors. They often help identify and develop job opportunities by leveraging their own campus connections and introducing job specialists to potential new employers in the community. Graduate students also coordinate meetings with students to schedule work assessments and administer tools such as the O\*NET Interest Profiler and Career One Stop resources. Education coaches guide students through these activities, while graduate students review results and help students explore relevant career clusters. Tools like the **Work Values Matcher on CareerOne Stop** can be especially helpful in supporting individualized planning, encouraging students to reflect on their goals, and opening up productive conversations about employment from new perspectives.



**Bob Donahue works at BSU's concession stand, The Bear Trap.**

## The Student Internship Experience

BSU's internship process is designed to help students build skills gradually, practice self-advocacy, and prepare for successful transition beyond the program.

### Student Spotlight: Finding Her Voice Through Service

One student in the BSU EXCEL program discovered her strengths through an internship at the Martin Richard Institute for Civic Engagement, a community service center on campus. She helped organize a blanket-making project for young children at Massachusetts General Hospital—designing flyers, promoting the event, recruiting volunteers, and assisting participants on the day of the project.

When she first joined the program, she was very shy and often avoided eye contact. During this project, her transformation was striking: She called out to students passing by, welcomed participants, and confidently guided them through the activity.

The experience wasn't without challenges. Her first attempt at running the event had low turnout, and she expressed real frustration. With encouragement, she worked harder on outreach for the next project—this time drawing a much larger group of volunteers. The growth was clear: Not only did she build practical skills in event planning and communication, but she also gained resilience, confidence, and a stronger sense of her own voice.

## Campus Internships at BSU

Area	Example Sites	Sample Activities
Media & Technology	Radio Station, BSU TV, Podcast Center, IT	Posting on social media, filming, podcasting, equipment setup, programming
Theatre & Arts	Costume Shop, Scene Shop, Lighting Shop	Sewing, painting, building sets, stage setup, managing lighting
Campus Services	Central Receiving, Copy & Print, Procurement, Library, Police Station	Shipping /receiving, filing, shelving, customer service, event support, pet care
Facilities & Grounds	Grounds Crew, Greenhouse, Microgreens, Business	Recycling, plant projects, growing and selling microgreens
Athletics & Recreation	Athletic Center, Pool Area	Customer service, fitness area support, equipment upkeep
Dining & Retail	Dining Halls, Concession Stand, Bookstore	Food prep, cashiering, smoothie making, organizing displays
Student Support & Offices	Community Service Center, Marketing & Media, Transformative Learning Center	Event planning, flyer design, photography, scheduling, filing



## 1. GOAL SETTING AND PREPARATION

Students, together with their education coach and partnership staff, review site supervisor feedback and set goals. To ensure progress, students focus on building one skill at a time, addressing weaknesses before adding to their strengths. Prior to placement, students learn about reasonable accommodations and practice describing their disability and support needs. They also learn about workplace expectations and how to interact with supervisors and employers.

## 2. INTERNSHIP SELECTION AND ONBOARDING

Students rank their top three internship choices. Supervisors sign an agreement for a 10-hour-per-semester placement, and students participate in a “meet and greet,” where they share documentation and practice self-advocacy. All students complete university-required CORI (MA Criminal Offender Record Information) checks, which also serve as a lesson in managing personal information.



**Brendan Curtain works at BSU's TV studio.**

## 3. PARTICIPATION AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Education coaches accompany students at internship sites, providing individualized support as needed. Job coaches scaffold learning to help students build skills and move toward greater

independence. Supervisors offer regular feedback, and coaches document progress using task analysis forms to show growth.

Depending on a student's prior experience and skill level, support may begin with hands-on modeling and gradually shift to verbal instruction, visual cues, gestures, and ultimately independent performance. Support is individualized to each student's needs.

The Massachusetts Work-Based Learning Plan is an effective tool for guiding conversations among the student, onsite supervisor, and job coach. Sample questions include:

- » How is the student's attendance and punctuality?
- » Are they taking initiative to manage their work?
- » Are they meeting their employment goals?

During individualized career meetings, job coaches review students' ongoing assessment results. These discussions create opportunities to adjust job goals or accommodations, while also helping students build essential skills in receiving and applying feedback.

## 4. TRANSITION PLANNING

In their final semester, students focus on planning for life after college. This includes reviewing their career portfolio, identifying and researching at least three job opportunities, and developing cover letters and mock interview skills. Adult-serving agencies receive the portfolio and related feedback to support smooth communication and service coordination. Coursework and internships are aligned with each student's post-exit goals—whether those involve employment, further education, or services from agencies such as Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services or MassAbility.

For some students, these work experiences lead directly to early career jobs. For others, they provide a strong foundation in essential soft skills, such as problem solving and communication, which are critical for success and job retention in entry-level positions.



**Shane Hathaway works at the BSU campus dining center.**

## Conclusion

The BSU EXCEL program demonstrates how evidence-based practices in work-based learning can be successfully translated into inclusive postsecondary education. By offering individualized internships, scaffolded supports, and structured opportunities for reflection and feedback, the program not only affirms research showing the critical role of work-based learning in post-school success but also highlights the tangible impact on students' lives. Through these experiences, students with IDD build essential skills, confidence, and networks that prepare them for competitive employment and meaningful futures beyond college.

## References

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### Zack Chipman

Zack Chipman is the community connections and job development specialist for the EXCEL Program at Bridgewater State University. For the past 11 years, he has supported students in developing core employability skills and pursuing individualized career goals that promote successful transitions to competitive employment and community engagement.



**Zack Chipman, community connections and job development specialist at Bridgewater State University's EXCEL Program.**

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The Center for Inclusive Higher Education and Transition is dedicated to advancing higher education and transition initiatives across Massachusetts. Our mission is to promote positive post-school outcomes for individuals with disabilities. We achieve this by offering professional development, training, and support to families, practitioners, advocates, and community partners.

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