MY PANTHER LIFE EXPERIENCE IN GAINING EMPLOYMENT

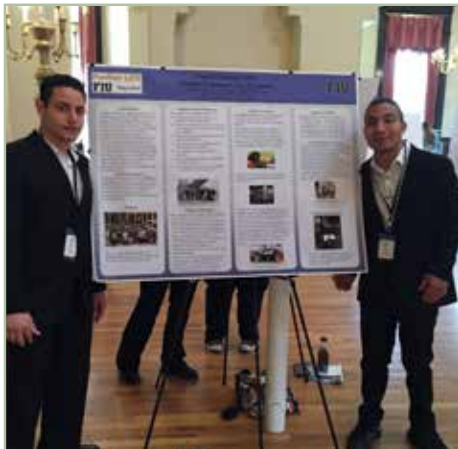*by Jonathan Viera*

In 2012, Project Panther LIFE accepted me into the Florida International University (FIU) community. Project Panther LIFE gives students with an intellectual disability the opportunity to have a college life, develop social skills, learn how to be more independent, and reach employment. I have been in the program for 4 years, and I have developed a lot of skills.

After I graduate this August, I will begin a full-time paid job at Dolphin Digital Media. This job will require me to apply my skills and do video editing and photo-shoot light placement and back-drops.

I've taken several courses at FIU that have prepared me for my career goal, which is working in journalism and mass communication. I took Introduction to Digital Media, Communicating in Film, and Introduction to Microcomputing. I have presented at the Florida Undergraduate Research Conference, at FIU, and at the University of Tampa about Project Panther LIFE. These presentations helped me gain confidence with public speaking.

Poster presentation at the University of Tampa

In Project Panther LIFE, I have a great support system that helps me with my courses, my homework, group projects, and more. Key individuals in my support system are my faculty advisor, academic mentor, peer coach, and program coordinator. My faculty advisor helps me choose courses that will help me reach my career and personal goals. My academic mentor guides me with my school projects by clarifying points, and by helping me improve my reading and writing skills.

I am introduced to activities at FIU through my peer coach. She

First cohort of students participating in the Honors College upTech Program

helps me create exercise routines and establish healthy eating habits, introduces me to other students on the campus, and helps me to be involved in campus activities.

I started job shadowing in the Honors College in 2012, when I started the program. Job shadowing is two or three days a week for two or three hours a day. It's an unpaid work experience in different departments or colleges at FIU which allows us to gain job skills. My faculty advisor saw the skills that I had acquired in high school, and he invited me to job shadow in the Information Technology (IT) department. After job shadowing for a year, I was offered a paid part-time job with IT.

Some of the skills that I learned working at the Honors College were to answer phone calls and communicate effectively with callers, deliver inter-departmental mail and communications, scan papers, and file. I also learned how to edit videos, such as Honors Hour, interview videos, and workshop videos.

My second job shadowing was at the College of Business. I practiced different kinds of interviews, and worked on my resume and cover letters. I also filled folders and arranged them by last name and first name.

After my job shadowing experiences, I was ready to go out into the community and do a paid internship. I was placed at Jeanette Nunez's office, who is a State of Florida

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Community Internship Experience

Panther LIFE has taught me that I have no limits. I took university courses that interested me, became more social and built long-lasting friendships, and understood the importance having a healthy lifestyle, such as nutrition and exercising. Most importantly, I have been able to sharpen my skills for my career.

I never expected to accomplish all of my goals. Panther LIFE has proven to me that with commitment, courage, and hard work I can accomplish anything that I want. My life has turned out to be positive. I can contribute to society, and this makes me feel that I am also needed.

Representative. I learned how to read House and Senate bills. I also learned how to research news on the Internet, scan business cards, and transfer them to a database.

I attended Project Panther LIFE's Summer Residential Program twice. We lived in apartment-style dorms, without the help of our parents, for four weeks. In this program I learned how to become more independent. This included doing laundry, ironing and folding clothes, preparing meals, managing money, making a grocery list and grocery shopping, and organizing my daily agenda. During the residential program, we attended workshops that helped us learn day-to-day life skills. Our parents visited us for some workshops as well. We discussed with them how we can be more responsible by doing chores at home, and we talked about our goals and how to prepare for the future.

This fall, I thought about helping students with disabilities in developing their computer skills. I told the idea to my supervisor in my employment, and he said that it was a great idea. Because no one had done this before on campus, and we would be the first ones to be doing this, we scheduled a meeting with the Project Panther LIFE coordinator to go over the program details. The Honors College Up Tech program will teach students how to dress for job interviews, how to present in front of big audiences, how to prepare for job searching, and how to do research.

Jonathan presenting during the upTech Program

Author Information

Jonathan Viera is a senior in the Panther LIFE program at Florida International University in Miami. He will be graduating this summer 2016 and is employed. Jonathan received encouragement and support throughout his time at FIU, as well as editorial assistance on this article, from Diana Valle-Riestra, Director of the Panther Life Program at Florida International University.

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