

**Working With People Living With Disabilities; Outcomes and  
Impacts on the Future Life of Contingent Employees**

**Recreation Integration Victoria  
2010-2011**

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# **Working With People Living With Disabilities; Outcomes and Impacts on the Future Life of Contingent Employees**

## **Introduction**

Recreation Integration Victoria (RIV) has been providing services for people living with disabilities for over 20 years. RIV has a core group of permanent staff including an Executive Director, a Coordinator of Services, and an Administration & Projects Assistant, however central to RIV's successful operation are a significant number of students hired throughout the year to help the office run smoothly and to work one-on-one with people in the community living with disabilities. These students traditionally have filled one of three roles: Inclusion Facilitator, Leisure Assistance Coordinator, or Summer Inclusion Service Coordinator. Over the past twenty years RIV has hired more than 300 people fill these positions, 165 of them have been summer students and/or co-op students. It is this group that is the focus of the current study.

Recreation Integration Victoria provides opportunities for people in the community living with disabilities to participate in leisure activities. Through their Leisure Assistance Program, people living with disabilities have the opportunity to take an aid worker with them to recreation and leisure facilities free of charge (at most locations) or at a discounted rate. These patrons would not be able to participate in the activity otherwise; many recreation centres, businesses, and organizations understand that additional support for them is necessary. RIV gives out these passes but can also set people up with a volunteer to assist participants and enjoy leisure activities with.

Additionally, RIV offers many programs promoting the inclusion of people with disabilities, either through education or the rental of specialized equipment for the adapted means of physical activity. Adapted recliner bikes, all-terrain wheelchairs, and trail riders are all available for loan at the RIV office throughout the year, and in most instances only require a damage deposit. RIV offers a number of Inclusion Facilitators to work one-on-one with children with disabilities who attend week long camps in the summer; providing this special population of children an opportunity they may otherwise not have.

Many of the Inclusion Facilitators, Leisure Assistance and Summer Coordinators have gained incredible skills and knowledge from their experience at RIV. Due to the long-standing partnership with the University of Victoria, Recreation Integration Victoria was chosen as an ideal organization to analyze the effectiveness of its own work experience. Through a Service Learning Internship Program (SLIP) grant, RIV has put together this research project; the purpose of which is to look at the outcomes and impacts RIV has had on its students, and their families, workplace, and communities.

## **Methods**

### ***General***

A case study approach using a mixed methodology design was applied to learn more about the role of RIV and its contingent employees; those in temporary or seasonal positions. A variety of methods were used to collect data including an online survey of RIV contingent employees, phone and in person interviews and a discussion with key RIV staff members and university staff who have worked closely with both the organization and the co-op students.

### ***Subjects***

Only past University of Victoria (UVIC) co-operative education students and students who worked at RIV as contingent employees, in one of three different positions were included in the study. A list of past co-op students was supplied by the University of Victoria's Co-operative Education Department to ensure we were including these people in our study. The confidential files at Recreation Integration Victoria were used to determine the names, job titles, years worked, email addresses, and parent's location of the past summer and University of Victoria co-op students who worked at the agency. This gave RIV and UVIC the opportunity to see the effectiveness of their programs both in respect to one another and different to one another.

A total of 165 people were contacted and targeted for survey and personal interviews. The population was a mix of males and females of full abilities and had a range of different positions and duties while working at Recreation Integration Victoria.

Recruitment of the past employees for participation started off from initial emails being sent to all the email addresses Recreation Integration Victoria had of past students.

Those who received the email were also asked to forward it on to other students with whom they had worked and still remained in contact with. Facebook messages were then sent out to those we did not have email addresses for and who we could find online. Phone calls to parents of past students were made in hopes of leaving messages for the students to contact the office regarding the project. From there, the remaining list of students was sent to administrators in the co-op department working on this project to determine if they had any recent contact information for them. 50 students were still not found. This group was from across the 21 year history although contact was more troublesome for those in the early years. That being said our response do represent the entire spectrum of the organization twenty plus year history.

A survey and interview questionnaire was constructed and then pretested on current RIV employees. Their suggestions resulted in several changes in wording and question ordering but no substantive change in interview or survey content. The final survey and interview questionnaire were subsequently submitted and received University of Victoria Ethics committee approval to proceed with the project.

AskItOnline was used to create and deliver the online survey, this tool did not store the personal contact information to the complete surveys and researchers were not able to view who specifically responded to any questions. Contact information was requested at the end of the survey for participants that were interested in completing interviews. Their contact information was sent to the office at Recreation Integration Victoria, for the research assistant to use and set up appointments with.

Interviews between the research assistant and participants were set up on their free time, so as to not impede on their work and life commitments. All of the interviews were recorded via voice recorder. 25 people were interviewed with interviews lasting between 7 and 43 minutes, the vast majority of the interviews were in the 20-minute range. Personal interviews were kept confidential unless permission was made by the participant to use their words for future use. All recorded interviews were transcribed by the research assistant then sent out, via email, to their respective participants for approval and confirmation that this was indeed what they had said. Their approval and signed clarification was sent to the office, assuring the researchers that these were their words and gave permission to use them in later documents for the purpose of recruitment and

applications.

## **Analysis**

Survey analysis was completed online in AskItOnline. Due to the quantitative nature of the surveys, AskItOnline was able to provide us with accurate, descriptive results from the data submitted by participants. Analysis of the interview transcriptions was done primarily by the research assistant, who looked for similarities between responses and outcomes of their experiences this was then corroborated by the faculty supervisor. Patton (2002) suggests that a researcher's own biases and reasons for conducting a study be explicitly considered as part of understanding the results of this type of qualitative study. To accomplish this the research assistant wrote a short reflection on her experience, this is included in Appendix F.

## **Results**

The following summary of the data is a combination of the stories shared in interviews and the survey data provide. Specific survey results and transcripts of interviews are available in Appendices C and E respectively.

## **Overview**

Working at RIV had a positive impact on the vast majority of those students who shared their opinions and stories with the researchers. Having access to 76 survey responses and 25 interviews of employees who have been a part of RIV's 21-year history, allows one to gain some tremendous insight into the working of an exceptional organization. The people who shared their stories were from all periods of RIV's history from the early 1990's right up until present day, though the majority of the respondents where from the from 2000-2010 time period.

We were interested in the impact this experience had on students who worked for RIV, not only the impact of the experience at the time but did that work experience influence any significant life decision(s), such as career and education choices and did it impact their values and the ways they now interact with their communities? The answer was clearly yes. The survey data, open-ended question feedback, and interviews

confirmed that the RIV experience and the co-op experience in general played a major role in the choices and values many former employees made and continue to hold. A summary of the key findings follows and is broken down into the specific impacts on education, career/work life and personal/community life. Each section has a quantitative summary highlighting key findings from the survey and an “In their own words” section that provides a sample of the stories and comments shared with us on that particular area of impact. As mentioned earlier, complete transcription and long answer responses can be found in Appendix E and Appendix C respectively.

### **Impact on Education**

The following results were in response to a 5-point scale with 5 being strongly agree and 1 being do not at all agree. It is important to note that the response to the education questions were overwhelming on the positive side of the scale i.e. 4 and 5. What follows are % for those reporting 5 on the scale.

40% strongly agreed that their experience at RIV influenced their decision to seek further related education with 37% of the total respondents going on to postgraduate degree programs. A further 5 people directly changed their faculty as a result of working at RIV.

RIV alumni also told us that they strongly agreed (52%) that working at RIV impacted their motivations and interests and that their experience positively influenced their student life (44%).

### **In their own words**

*RIV inspired me to seek further education to assist people in my community to live as independently as possible and to allow people to optimize their enjoyment and well being.*

*By working at RIV I realized that I was interested in a career in healthcare. I became very interested in the neurophysiology behind developmental disabilities. I began taking neuroscience courses, and now want to work toward a career involving neuroscience or work with people with developmental disabilities.*

*Well my schooling became more specific to occupational therapy, trying to get courses that will enable me to go into occupational therapy school, so it changed in that area. I want to get more experience with rehabilitation; I'm trying to pick up more psychology*

*courses to get more experience about the workings of the mind. For me it was more about biology before, because I was going to become a doctor, biology, chemistry, which I enjoy but now that I'm going to OT, I feel like I need to get some more experience in psychology, rehabilitation aspect.*

*I'm going in to education, so I'm going to be a teacher and then I'd never worked with RIV before and I hadn't had much experience working with children with disabilities. So having had that experience, my interests are now in, so the programs set up so you don't have a choices. But then after in a master program, my interest would lie in furthering my education in terms of teaching children with disabilities. So that changed drastically because before that I was just like oh I'm going to be a regular classroom teacher. But now it's like oh - there's kids out there that need more assistance. And I feel like I could do that because I started my training at RIV and it would just be a growth from there.*

### **Impact on Career**

Working at RIV had long-term impacts on former employees' career and work choices. The following results were in response to a 5-point scale with 5 being strongly agree and 1 being do not at all agree. Similar to the education questions, the response to the career questions were overwhelming all on the positive side of the scale i.e. 4 and 5. What follows are % for those reporting 5 on the scale.

42% strongly agreed that their experience at RIV influenced their work immediately following their work term.

47% strongly agreed that their RIV experience influenced their work 2-5 years following their time at RIV.

43% strongly agreed that their experience at RIV influenced their current work.

38% strongly agreed that working at RIV affected my career goals following the completion of my work term.

### **In their own words**

*It helped me identify the recreation field as a helping field... trying to help all residents be active and involved. I saw the benefit of building community and this has long influenced my values regarding relationship-building and community development.*

*It helped to give me confidence in knowing that I could find a job. I have a disability myself, and working at RIV was a very positive experience for me. The people were amazing and really helped me to learn how to do my job.*

*Providing me with the experience and training needed to deal with a wide range of students. I have developed into a well-rounded teacher with a broader understanding of student needs and abilities. I wouldn't have had the confidence to pursue a career in teaching if it wasn't for my experiences at RIV.*

### **Impact on Personal and Community Life**

One may expect that an education and work experience may impact education and career/work choices however one of the unexpected findings in this study was the degree to which former employees still credit RIV with impacting their current personal lives and the ways in which they interact with their communities. For many of these people the RIV experience is a decade or more old and may have been for as little as 3 months, yet for many it still seems to have been a critical event in helping to shape who they are today.

37% of those people we spoke with strongly agreed (5 on a 5 pt. scale) that their experience at RIV influenced their community involvement.

Working at RIV not only impacts the respondents' individual choices, but also encourages them to share what they learned at RIV with others. For example, respondents reported that they often or always shared what they learned at RIV with family and friends (68%), workplace (50%), and with the community (35%).

Perhaps one of the most telling pieces of information was that in 76% of respondents agreed that they regularly and actively advocate for people with disabilities. Not only do they hold the values of RIV but this group states that they regularly act on those values.

It is clear that for many, the RIV experience played a critical and memorable role in the lives of those we spoke with. It is interesting to note that over 39% of respondents reported that they regularly remain in contact with the people and partner organizations they were involved with during their time at RIV; despite a short work term with the organization and now living across Canada, and for some across the globe. The high response rate for this project and the willingness of the respondents to provide additional

information further confirms the special nature this experience provided them. For example, even after filling out the survey, 68% of respondents continued to be interested in providing further information about their experience and 70% indicated would like to be involved in a reunion of past student employees.

### **In their own words**

*RIV instilled solid values into my work ethic. Doug and Bonnie are amazing mentors. Through their leadership, I learned to lead. I have just finished a year as the Program Coordinator at a non-profit society. This non-profit provides complimentary and alternative therapies for health to people with advanced health issues. I have just returned from abroad and now work in a school. This career shift has been a great leadership opportunity for me. Through my workplace I will start a project to provide families with summer camp opportunities for their kids. From working at RIV, I have learned that I always need to volunteer, be a part of the non-profit community and contribute my time through recreation.*

*It's been several years since my work placement at RIV, however I will never forget the values instilled to staff/volunteers that are involved with the organization. The inclusivity, compassion and trust that the permanent staff at RIV provide to all individuals involved is truly inspirational. As I have experienced working with many different people since then I always reflect back on the staff at RIV as examples of great leaders and coaches.*

*One is always influenced by their day-to-day decisions and experiences, whether they know it or not. Working with people with disabilities not only gives you insight into what it's like to live with a disability, but also gives you the tools to feel comfortable in knowing how to interact with people living with disabilities.*

*My experiences at RIV taught me so much. I learned how to interact and to be comfortable interacting with people with disabilities. This gave me more confidence in my daily interactions with all people.*

*RIV influences my community involvement. I have been actively fund raising over the past five years to give back to people with disabilities. I also find myself speaking up when people speak negatively against individuals based on their race, religion, sexual orientation, and abilities.*

*Not only did working at RIV impact people's values and choices but we also discovered that this learning is further shared, in a sense the experience is passed on.*

*Ensuring our department approach to inclusion is appropriate and families are well supported in their recreation pursuits. Since my RIV experience, I have never advocated for municipally funded recreation as segregated services... they have their role in the*

*community, but I have never wanted our department services to be set up in this way. I have continued to advocate for appropriate, inclusive, services where families and clients are valued and individually supported to meet their needs and goals.*

*Talking to friends, partners, and colleagues about disability politics, activism, and advocacy.*

*Ensuring people are identified as people not by their abilities, color of their skin, social location, etc. I try to model this in my language, and actions.*

*I believe that I advocate for people with disabilities. Whether I am explaining to someone the appropriate language to use (i.e. disability vs. handicap) or educating someone on what a particular syndrome or disability is - these are all things that I learned while working at RIV.*

*Providing information to the students that I teach regarding the importance of inclusive leisure activities. I am constantly reminding students regarding the holistic nature of caring, for one's social connectedness is as important as their biological needs.*

### **What Makes RIV a Special Place?**

Although discovering the impacts of the RIV work experience was the key focus of this study, we may also be able to offer some insight into why RIV seems to have such an impact on many of its employees. Clearly the organizations focus on training, autonomy and an authentic and sincere commitment to building relationship with these employees are at the core of the organizations success. Permanent staff modeling the values of the organization and creating a work environment where employee felt like “more than just students” was heard repeatedly in a variety of forms. To gain further insight participants were asked to share critical moments or ah–ha moments, with the researcher. A sample of these is included below.

*I still cringe when I hear the term "special needs" which is still so prevalent in society and recreation. I'm amazed at the lack of good training in the field and still not available to recreation professionals. Many of my staff have no training or experience in inclusion for people with disabilities. I still go back to my basics of philosophy and values learned at RIV. Continuity with Doug, Bonnie and Faye has been invaluable to the long-term learning and approach with students. They should be recognized for the valuable contribution they've made to the field!!*

*Everyone regardless of ability and/or disability deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.*

*Being able to have hands on experience in my field of study was extremely valuable. It allowed me to better apply the theory we were learning in the classroom at the time as I was also experiencing it through my co-op placements. Additionally, by having real life work experience when graduating it made me a more desirable candidate to employers, which better positioned me to enter the workforce in this field. I would highly recommend a co-op education experience."*

*That I was learning many more applicable life skills from work than I ever was from school. The knowledge and experience that I gained from RIV and other co-ops became more internalized and relevant for future employment than much of my course work. At the time, I was convinced that it was the other way around.*

*Work experience can play a large role in successfully obtaining work outside of school.*

*I had a number of them as each of my co-ops influenced my career and my life. RIV was my first co-op and I knew nothing about working with people with disabilities... a few years later after graduation, I became the Executive Director for a disabled sporting association, sat on numerous provincial and national committees, and volunteered with children with cognitive disabilities. So, that was a big ah-ha moment, starting by knowing nothing and within 4 years making it my career. My second co-op was with a sports council and it influenced where I would eventually call home. It also introduced me to the people who would hire me for my next co-op at a sporting organization. This job had a major impact as it provided great networking opportunities and was directly responsible for my first job after graduation. My ah-ha moment came when I realized that almost 10 years after my first co-op, I now work in a building where the two offices on my floor are run by my former bosses at the sporting organizations I worked for years ago. The ah-ha comes when you realize how small the sport industry is and how important it is to get opportunities to meet, interact, and work with people in the industry.*

*Given that it has been several years since I completed University it is difficult for me to recall specific ah-ha moments, however I would say that my co-op experience at RIV was exceptional. The collaborative learning environment that is provided and the way the permanent staff team promotes independence and initiative is truly fantastic at this stage of your education.*

*My 'ah-ha' moments started with my first week of work when RIV hosted a sporting event for people with disabilities where I truly realized individuals with disabilities could do absolutely anything they put their minds to, they just might get there a different way. I feel like I had so many ah-ha moments through working with the staff at RIV and meeting the clients. I discovered the passion I have for working in this field. I discovered the importance and power of the meaning people get out of participating in activities that find them joy and inclusion in their community. I discovered that organizations like RIV who have creative, compassionate and encouraging staff can literally change the path of*

*lives for many people by showing them opportunities exist that they didn't know were possible.*

*The co-op experiences that I had influenced everything! My ah-ha moment was the realization that I wanted to further my education following my under-grad so that I could have the opportunity to continue working that population that I was working with while at RIV, kids with disabilities.*

*The ability to manage challenging programs and staff and to work in a variety of environments. I had three different and interesting positions. Each position taught me different skills and provided me with essential work experience.*

*I have a lot of transferable skills that I have gained from various co-op positions. Although only RIV was directly related to wanting to work in the helping/health profession, I feel I gained a lot of experience from my other placements. I also discovered that it is hard to find co-op jobs for students in my program [not recreation] that don't want a writing position. I also learned that I am more confident in an interview setting then I think that I am.*

*How much I will be able to take what I have learned and apply it to the classrooms where I will teach. I also found I was a much more patient in both my professional and personal lives after working for RIV.*

*Working with people with disabilities is extremely rewarding. Being an advocate for people with disabilities to be treated with respect and dignity is important for the health of the community and the individual. Important to empower people with a disability to advocate and educate the public on their rights and contributions to society and to reduce stigma. Assisting people to engage in meaningful activity is vital to a well rounded fulfilled life, especially if you have a disability.*

## **Implications**

So what do the findings of this study mean? RIV and co-op staff will likely draw specific conclusions based on their own experience and interpretation of the data but what follows a short summary of the researcher's thoughts on some general implication for co-op students, former employees of RIV, RIV, and the broader community.

### ***Co-op***

The co-op experience seems to improve with time. Former students remarked that it was not until after school and in some cases, some years after school that they realized the true benefits of their co-op experience. Conveying this to students is important.

Participants also clearly noted that the benefits touted by co-op do deliver, the position offer an advantage over other non-co-op students by expanding their networks early in their career and providing valuable job experience to enhance their competencies and their resumes for the time when they are looking for a more permanent position. Former co-op students also remarked how these position broaden their horizon of career possibilities, helped them move out of their comfort zone and in a few cases even helped them realize that a particular job was not something they wanted to spend their career in.

### ***Former RIV employees***

More specific to RIV, contingent work experiences had significant impacts on employees, many of which were documented earlier. However several other key benefits were noted through the data collection. Clearly RIV played a huge role in helping individuals achieve personal growth. In particular the two skills that were frequently cited were improved communication skills and an increase level of patience. Former employees commented how understanding that one communicates in a variety of ways and how we are all different in this aspect, is a huge discovery that continues to be a part of their success in both professional and personal realms. This idea of individual difference is also something that stayed with former employees, the sense that each person is unique, disability or no disability. Entering into relationships in both work and personal life with this perspective was noted as being an important lesson learned from the RIV experience.

### ***RIV***

As an organization, RIV should be very proud of the strong culture and employees they have developed over the past 21 years. Essentially the message is “Keep doing what you have been doing!”

A few key lessons arise here that other employers could learn from. First and foremost, we heard something to the effect that by treating employees like “real people” they act like real people. The idea that students were given responsibility, autonomy and support was repeated, raised and also reflects what the literature suggests would be part of best practices in human resource management.

Former employers also remarked on the importance of the emphasis and time spent on training and although they often do see it immediately they quickly realized, as

they got into the job, how valuable this was. For RIV, the time and effort spent with students pays dividends. It allows for better service to your clients, more autonomous employees and also appears to translate into future advocates and a higher level of community action from those employees long after they leave the organization.

### ***Community/Society***

As suggested by the previous points, there are also a number of benefits to society from these experiences. Former employees take with them a more inclusive viewpoint of society as a whole and they are more focused on addressing the needs of all in society, not just those who have a disability. This experience also seems to instill values and actions related to community involvement and engagement early in a person's career.

### **What Next?**

Given the overwhelmingly positive response what can RIV do to improve what is a clearly an effective contingent work experience? The data did suggest a few small tweaks that the organization and its leadership may wish to consider. One request to improve the already excellent training experience was to integrate more case based examples specifically aimed at employees with previous experience working with the organization's target populations. Also related to enhancing the training experience was to increase the emphasis on the importance of communication between parent(s) and inclusion facilitator, in particular how to better get to the core of the participant's needs. Finally former employees also suggested that increased clarity of the Inclusion Facilitators role in camps would enhance effectiveness of the work experience, as would having a Summer Inclusion Service Coordinator who had previously worked as an Inclusion Facilitator.

### **Conclusion**

The experience of working at RIV is very beneficial to both students and the communities they live in. RIV is able to spread their vision of the importance of inclusion into the community through their daily work but also long term through their former employees. Even after employees left RIV for further schooling or career positions, the majority still actively advocate for people with disabilities and share their

experiences at RIV with those around them. Not only does RIV create a legacy for inclusion, but also instill these values in its former employees who then act as advocates in their own communities.