Surveys indicate that many unemployed people with disabilities would prefer to be in the labor force (Erickson et al., 2014). In addition, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, adults of working age are almost twice as likely to be unemployed as compared to their peers without disabilities (United States Department of Labor, 2023). This gap is due to employers generally believing that individuals with disabilities do not have a sustainable work ethic or proper skill set to uphold the position. The F.O.R.E.S.T. Program, Facilitating Occupational Readiness and Engagement through Skills Training, was created at The Woodlands Foundation to fill the gap and provide life and job skills training to individuals with disabilities who have aged out of the school system.

Objective 1: Create a sustainable virtual platform to educate local businesses and The Woodlands Foundation staff on the value individuals with disabilities can bring to the workplace.

Objective 2: Develop an interest assessment for F.O.R.E.S.T. Program participants, which identifies skills and interests that will guide the placement of their community site.

Methods

Participants

The Woodlands Foundation Staff Training

- Staff members at The Woodlands Foundation

Interest Assessment Administration

- The Woodlands Foundation camp participants aged 22-29

Procedures

- Conducted training session to educate staff on the F.O.R.E.S.T. program, acquiring community partners, and administration of the interest assessment.

- Conducted surveys before and after training session.

Outcome Measures

- Confidence levels in understanding the F.O.R.E.S.T. Program and inclusivity of the community, measured via Likert scales and open-ended questions.

- Confidence levels in completing the F.O.R.E.S.T. Program Protocol measured via a Likert scale.

- Open-ended feedback for understanding and usability of interest assessment.

“I made me feel good and accomplished.”

“The questions helped me to think about future jobs.”

“...makes you feel like you can talk about your feelings.”

The Woodlands Foundation completed pre and post surveys related to the training session that was provided.

The results displayed include three categories:

- Overall Training Objectives
- Community Partner Acquaintion
- Interest Assessment Administration

Results were measured on a Likert scale with an increase in staff confidence shown across all three categories.

Results: Community Partner Training Program

To provide the most optimal experience for F.O.R.E.S.T. Program participants with future community partners, A Community Partner Training Program was created to provide to local businesses.

The demographics of the individuals participating in this training are displayed in two categories:

- Business Types
- Business Roles

The participants completed pre and post surveys related to the information discussed in the training program.

The results indicated increased confidence on a Likert scale in four categories:

- F.O.R.E.S.T. Mission and Purpose
- Role as Community Partner
- Working with Individuals with Disabilities
- Hosting Participants at Site

Additional results indicated 92% of individuals are likely or very likely to recommend the F.O.R.E.S.T. Program to other local businesses.

Results: Woodlands Staff Training

The staff at The Woodlands Foundation completed pre and post surveys related to the training session that was provided.

The results displayed include three categories:

- Orientation and Training
- Community Partner Integration
- Interest Assessment Administration

The Woodlands Foundation completed pre and post surveys related to the information discussed in the training program.

The results indicated increased confidence on a Likert scale in four categories:

- F.O.R.E.S.T. Mission and Purpose
- Role as Community Partner
- Working with Individuals with Disabilities
- Hosting Participants at Site

Additional results indicated 92% of individuals are likely or very likely to recommend the F.O.R.E.S.T. Program to other local businesses.

Results: Interest Assessment

The interest assessment was completed by 10 participants over two weekend retreats at The Woodlands Foundation from a similar population to that of the future F.O.R.E.S.T. Program. The participants were able to complete the assessment with minimal to moderate assistance provided. The results of the assessment indicate that it was intuitive to complete, as 8 out of 10 participants stated they had no difficulty answering the questions. Quotes below from participants showcase that completing the assessment was an overall positive experience.

“The questions helped me to think about future jobs.”

“...makes you feel like you can talk about your feelings.”

“...made me feel good and accomplished.”

Future Recommendations

Based on the compilation of all phases in the development of the F.O.R.E.S.T. Program, these are the recommendations for The Woodlands Foundation moving forward. These recommendations provide a framework for The Woodlands Foundations to execute a successful post-transition program, filling the gap in this area of need.

The barriers faced included lack of participation, limited feedback and change in leadership. There was limited participation among local businesses resulting in a limited data pool containing feedback for the Community Partner Training Program. To increase our data pool, The Woodlands Foundation staff completed the training program to obtain desired feedback. Additionally, the open-ended questions on the Interest Assessment feedback form, resulted in participants providing nondescriptive answers. This led to lack of direction for improvements of the assessment. Also, there was a change in leadership at The Woodlands Foundation during this phase. The plan to implement the F.O.R.E.S.T. program in an existing building changed to occur in a newly constructed building, which delayed implementation.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to The Woodlands Foundation and their staff for their ongoing support and flexibility. Most notably thank you to Clarissa Amond (Program Manager) and Samantha Ellwood (Executive Director) for their work as our site mentors. An additional thank you to the participants of The Woodlands for welcoming us into their weekend on-site retreats.

References

