



## **Occupational and Life Skills Program: General Description and Background**

The following information was provided by the staff of Occupational and Life Skills Program at Bellevue College in Seattle, Washington. Northwest Arkansas is considering a formal partnership with Bellevue to deliver the named program.

### **Description**

Adults with cognitive disabilities in multiple communities across the nation are often under educated, unemployed, or under employed. We identify these potential students as “tweeners”. Some attempt community college and drop out after being unsuccessful. Others are moving from one low paying job to another usually because the work culture is not understood. Many are living at home with families unsure of the next steps in life.

Occupational and Life Skills (OLS) gives adults with cognitive disabilities the opportunity to earn an associate degree, achieve gainful employment and become self-sufficient, contributing citizens. It is the only program of its kind in the nation, and the outcomes are exemplary: At Bellevue College, the graduate employment rate is 85%, compared to a national average of 25% for those with similar disabilities. OLS attrition rates are low, graduation rates are 82%, and college outcomes are reached.

Through accredited college curriculum, students are taught to understand their unique strengths and disabilities, and to become their own best advocates. OLS’ distinct curriculum emphasizes the hard and soft skills required to help students become exceptional employees. They spend extended time focused on building a personalized career pathway, culminating in a 200-hour internship. The program demands full student commitment; acceptance is challenging and dependent on meeting baseline skills and participating in a program assessment.

The OLS at Bellevue College is recognized nationally as a leading best-practice center. Student success comes from a ‘scaffolded learning’ approach to education, in which the curriculum builds and overlaps, class by class and year by year, to reinforce critical information, ideas and outcomes. OLS partnership with local businesses also increases the college connection with their communities. OLS is beginning the replication process, working with like-minded institutions to accredit and replicate OLS on their campuses. By replicating, an underserved population is being educated and returning to the community to contribute at a higher rate both in the workplace and as a citizen.

NWACC has begun to engage the community and will in the next few months determine the level of need and support in the community. If community need justifies program delivery and community support is sufficient to provide adequate support for the program’s unique demands, NWACC in partnership with Bellevue college will look to customize the OLS program to best fit our needs and circumstances without compromising the program’s curriculum and outcomes.

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