

Making a difference with Project SEARCH

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Finding a job with little-to-no employment experience can be tough. And, it's even more difficult for young adults who have intellectual disabilities or are on the autism spectrum. The good news? By partnering with [Project SEARCH](#), a year-long employment program that supports young people with significant disabilities, UC Health campuses in [Irvine](#) and [Los Angeles](#) have opened their doors to young adult interns — and everyone has benefitted.

Access to meaningful employment

Project SEARCH began more than 23 years ago, when Erin Riehle, director of the Cincinnati Children's Emergency Department saw an opportunity: She believed that some complex duties in her department, such as stocking supply cabinets, would be well-suited to people with intellectual disabilities, like many of the hospital's clients. Today its mission still reflects Riehle's original intent, to "prepare young people with significant disabilities for success in integrated, competitive employment."

Project SEARCH programs have spread throughout the U.S. and the world, with locations as diverse as Alaska, Ireland and Bahrain. While many programs, like those at UC Irvine

and UCLA, remain in medical settings, utilities, museums, transportation agencies and other industries are also taking part.

A decade of possibility

This year, UCLA Health is celebrating a decade of [partnership with Project SEARCH](#). Through a second partnership with PathPoint — a local nonprofit organization that helps people with disabilities lead independent lives — the UCLA Health program blends classroom instruction with career exploration and hands-on job training in a variety of work sites. Assignments range from clerical duties, such as data entry, filing and mail services, to janitorial services and patient assistance.

To date, nearly 70 students have completed UCLA Health's Project SEARCH program and 61 percent of its graduates have found competitive employment within one year of graduation, including 17 former interns now employed by UCLA Health.

"We started with four student interns who rotated through three departments at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center," explains Kristin DiMirez, senior recruiter, UCLA Health Talent Acquisition. "In 2018, we had our largest class yet with 12 student interns currently receiving education and hands-on experience across 13 different departments at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center and UCLA Medical Center, Santa Monica."

DiMirez calls the program an all-around win for UCLA Health, student interns and the community. "The students have such a great attitude. They're eager to work and take pride in mastering a task and doing it well," she says. "They bring a lot of joy to everyone who works with them."

Supporting adults with autism

UC Irvine Health, which welcomed its second group of interns in [January of this year](#), has focused on a special niche. "Ours is among the first programs to focus exclusively on adults with autism," explains John Gratzle. "Our interns are usually social introverts that just need a little special help adapting to workplace norms and work-task parameters."

The UC Irvine Project SEARCH program includes a partnership with Goodwill and Santiago College, which help provide career guidance throughout the internship process.

Each UC Irvine Health department has a mentor who offers guidance to the interns, helping them adjust to their roles. Gratzle, a senior health physicist, is one such mentor, teaching them about common workplace experiences and how to handle them.

In addition to being professionally rewarding, this work has a deep personal significance for Gratzle. "My nephew is 26 and currently living at home with this disability," he says. "His

parents are trying very hard, but there is little help there for him. Project SEARCH programs, like the one here at UC Irvine, is one way for me to help manifest real improvement in quality of life for these interns.”

“We are thrilled to be a part of this program,” echoes Steve Eckberg, executive director of human resources for UCI Medical Center. “Many of the interns in this program are able to hold fulfilling jobs and just need a little help.”

And, Eckberg says, “While we are excited to be able to help them, they have in many ways helped UCI even more. We are very proud of all the interns and all they were able to accomplish as their road to success passed through UCI.”

Learn more about [Project SEARCH](#).