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Nicolet partners with Headwaters Inc.

By Mary Ann Doyle, Associate Editor
March 10, 2012 | [0 comments](#)

This group of students from Headwaters, Inc. and special education classes from area high schools, will be the first class to graduate from Nicolet College after completing a "soft skills" course that teaches proper social behavior and ethics in the workplace. From left, front, are Billie Jo Scheuerman, Jenna Laska, Natalie Schneider, David Strid, Anna Morre, course instructor Sarah Schirra, and Nicolet President Elizabeth Burmaster; back, Richard Deaton, Scott Zeinert, Cody Hochstatler and Cody Synkelma. Photo By Mary Ann Doyle

The excitement is palatable as nine students settle into their seats in a classroom on the Nicolet College campus. They come prepared with sharpened pencils and notebooks to begin their lessons as Instructor, Sarah Schirra, welcomes them with an encouraging smile and a little friendly chat before class begins.

While at first glance these college students are like any other, in reality they all share special talents they are working hard to hone so they can become valuable employees in any number of careers. The fact that they are intellectually challenged is a minor detail compared to their eagerness to learn and their enthusiasm for being college students. "I couldn't wait to take this course," said David Strid, one of the students. "My mom is so proud of me."

These students will be the first class ever to graduate from this program. It all started when a Disabilities Project Committee was formed to explore the possibility that students with intellectual disabilities could benefit from taking a college course developed specifically for their needs. This committee consisted of area educators and college administrators who were eager to collaborate to create a program targeting people with intellectual disabilities.

"This college is here to serve all the citizens of the Northwoods," said Elizabeth Burmaster, president of Nicolet College. "These students bring a special set of skills with them, and we are so thrilled they are here learning to apply those skills to finding and keeping employment."

The committee selected Sarah Schirra to teach the course. This dedicated instructor taught special education students for 26 years before retiring last year from the Rhinelander district. When she was approached to teach this particular class, she jumped at the chance, realizing the course could provide the "missing link" intellectually disabled students need to go on to become successful employees.

"You can train someone to do a particular job but many times these students need to learn specific social skills to be successful in employment," she said. "They may be able to perform a task but if they can't communicate effectively with their boss or fellow employees then they aren't going to be successful no matter where they work."

And that's the primary focus of this course; to expose students not only to a variety of employment opportunities within their capabilities, but also to show them how to interact with fellow employees, their boss and customers.

The course started Feb. 1 and will run until June 1, meeting on Monday, Wednesday and Friday for one hour. This is a collaborative effort between Nicolet College, Headwaters Inc., Rhinelander High School, Lakeland Union High School in Minocqua and Northland Pines High School in Eagle River. Funding for the program comes equally from all these entities, and it is open to special education students and Headwaters clients who are not only eager to learn, but also demonstrate a desire to be employed.

"Many of the clients at Headwaters are very eager employees," said Headwaters Director Mary Hardke. "They will do anything to be successful on the job. It gives them a sense of purpose and a sense of pride to be able to contribute. And they are so proud when they can show off a paycheck."

Sarah employs a number of strategies to teach her students their lessons which are encompassed under the umbrella of "soft skills." Role playing is a big part of their education. "We try and play out a wide variety of scenarios so the students feel prepared when they get on the job," she said. "This course will teach them skills in dealing with a variety of personality types and also job expectations."

She cites an example of an employee not being able to remember a series of assignments a boss might request in a restaurant setting. "The manager might say sweep the floor, wipe down tables and then take out the trash," said Sarah.

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"Some of my pupils might have a hard time remembering that list so we show them how to write down their assignments. There's nothing wrong with having a little notebook for that purpose and they learn how to use that strategy to their advantage."

Some role playing scenarios might involve strategies on how to diffuse on-the-job conflicts or prevent them all together; how to effectively communicate with fellow employees, customers and management; and strategies they may have to adopt to explain their disability if that need should arise. They also learn the importance of a work ethic and how important it is to show up on time, to dress properly and to present a positive attitude while on the job.

This course also exposes these students to a wide variety of employment settings. For instance, one day last week a Nicolet College culinary instructor visited the class, explaining the spectrum of jobs this field can offer and demonstrating to the students the proper way an employee in this line of work would need to perform to be successful in this type of career. Students are also exposed to professionals and instructors in the fields of carpentry, construction, landscaping, building maintenance and health care.

In addition, the students get tips on how to apply for a job and how to prepare for a job interview. In fact, some students taking the course are already employed and they are learning important skills that will make them even better employees. "I'm very excited about taking this course," said Scott Zeinert who works at Goodwill. "I've already learned a lot that I can use at my job."

And while it's evident these students are eagerly soaking up all the education they can get, in their own way, they are teaching others just how far enthusiasm and persistence can go in developing a successful and happy life.

"These students inspire me every day," said Sarah. "They are a joy to teach, and I'm very grateful I have the opportunity to be part of their success."

Associate Editor Mary Ann Doyle is available at madoyle@jrn.com.

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