



## Positive Attitude, Positive Impact

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For most students, the progression of their education after high school is an obvious choice to attend college. For students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, that choice is not always available — or even possible. However, at the [Vanderbilt University Kennedy Center](#), the opportunity for an educational experience beyond high school exists through Tennessee's founding program called [Next Steps](#). The two-year, non-residential program of study offers academic, social and career development, fosters personal growth and independence in a compassionate and supportive environment.

One of the main focuses of classes students take in the Next Steps program is job readiness. "The content taught in technology class increases in complexity over all four semesters," explained Next Steps Director Tammy Day. "Students begin with a basic computer class and gradually learn to use email, upload content, search the internet, spreadsheet and word-processing programs — and even PowerPoint." Another focus is work-based ethics and interpersonal skills, where students not only learn interview techniques and how to prepare cover letters, but also career exploration through the experience of an internship. "It's through these experiences that students are exposed to a variety of tasks to learn what they'd be happy doing," she says.

## NETWORKING YIELDS RESULTS

[Tennessee Works](#), a collection of agencies synergistically working to increase employment opportunities for young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, partnered with Next Steps to create a video of employers speaking about the benefits of hiring these young adults, so more companies can recognize their abilities to contribute. [Barnes & Noble at Vanderbilt University](#), Tennessee Performing Arts Center (TPAC), Best Buy, Music City Convention Center and more than a dozen other companies in the Nashville area, employ Next Steps graduates. William Taylor, Textbook Manager at the Barnes & Noble at Vanderbilt University bookstore, was one of three employers interviewed in the video, along with Andrea Arnold of the Nashville Convention & Visitors Corps and Lori Ward of TPAC.

<https://youtu.be/v4IgP3pndZ8>

Will and Daniel, two Next Steps graduates that Taylor manages, are currently employed by the bookstore and working in the textbook department. Including his internship, Will has been at the store for over two years and requested a transfer to textbooks from general merchandise because he prefers books. Daniel has been employed at the store for approximately 10 months. “He is upbeat, always wearing a smile and happy to be at work,” explained Taylor. The pair pays careful attention to course codes when helping students find books for classes or shelving books after delivery. “They have a perfect sense of the alpha-numeric coding process we use and perform these functions effortlessly with virtually no error,” said Taylor. For a bookstore, it’s an invaluable gift.

## ABLE BODIED, NOT DISABLED

Both Taylor and Arnold comment on their employees’ infectious positive attitudes. “I know we’re going to have fun if Daniel and or Will are working that day,” said Taylor. Store Manager Beth Cain described Will and Daniel as fabulous booksellers that embody the mission of [Barnes and Noble College](#). “They are part of our family. We observe them enjoying the camaraderie of working with others and see that they are passionate about everything they do when coming to work. We coach and counsel them along the way, just as we do with every other bookseller.”

Employers in the video admit to having concerns about the abilities of the graduates and what they can accomplish. Many times, just making small accommodations like providing a daily task list and giving advance notice is all that an employer needs to do to help these employees become successful.

Partnerships with national companies like [Barnes & Noble College](#) have positive impacts on individuals in the program by opening doors to other businesses, so more opportunities can become available. Cain thoughtfully offered, “Barnes and Noble College is a visible place, and the community is seeing them actively participating — and as able bodied, not disabled.

*Beth-Ann, I couldn't be more pleased with this article. Thank you for wanting to share this story, but most importantly for the compassionate way you told the story. It is storytelling like this that is going to continue to open more doors for people like Daniel and Will.*  
*With much gratefulness,*  
**Tammy**

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