

by Rebecca Moody

Hello! I am a student at Vanderbilt University studying special education. I am writing to share about my experience with the Next Steps at Vanderbilt University program and how it has impacted my life.

Back in high school, I volunteered in a self-contained special education classroom. After a year of working with the students, I graduated and was accepted at Vanderbilt University. When I went to say goodbye to the students who were now my friends, I was heartbroken to discover that they had very minimal plans for their futures. Many did not know what they would do after graduating. I was shocked to find out that this situation was not unique to my high school, but that students with disabilities all across the U.S. also were unsure of their futures.

Coming to Vanderbilt and finding Next Steps, a program for students with intellectual disabilities on campus, changed everything for me. Just months before coming to Vanderbilt, I had seen firsthand the need

for students with disabilities to have college opportunities. And now seeing that this was possible helped me to find my passion for the field of postsecondary education. I wanted to be a part of Next Steps to help students achieve their future goals, whether that be college, a job, or other experiences. I immediately signed up

to become an Ambassadors (that is our name for peer mentors--it is a play on our mascot, the Vanderbilt Commodores). Since freshman year, I have tutored seven students who are part of the Next Steps program and developed a meaningful relationship with each of them. After one semester as an Ambassador, I officially declared special education to be my major. And although there is no specific track for transition, I am unofficially but passionately working towards the goal of becoming a transition professional--someone who supports people with disabilities as they transition from high school to adult life.

The students I have worked with have such an amazing optimism. They are by far the hardest-working students I have ever met on campus, and they never complain about going to class. Unlike many people I know, they are eager to go to class because of their excitement about learning new things. At



Rebecca Moody, Vanderbilt University Class of 2014, Next Steps peer mentor since 2010

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Michael Heroux (left), Sean Faulkner (middle), and Rebecca (right), at a campus event.

internships, they never complain or give up. They work hard to be the best employees possible, and I honestly believe that they are.

Through their unwavering positive attitude, I myself have felt a change in how I view my time here in college. The appreciation that students in Next Steps have for being a part of a university community is something that many college students take for granted. I see my enrollment differently now: I see it as an amazing blessing, and an opportunity to make sure more people can feel this way too. All students should have access to a community that supports their dreams and works with them to achieve their goals.

Next Steps has given me a new outlook on life and a clear picture of what I want to do after I graduate. The students in the program are my peers and my friends. I see how Next Steps has impacted their life and how excited they are for their futures. I hope that I can continue making a difference in their lives in the same way they have made a difference in mine.

**Vanderbilt University
Ambassadors volunteer a
minimum of two hours per
week working as peer mentors
to students in the Next Steps
program. Mentors help with
academics and offer support
for campus activities such as
working out at the gym, attending
campus events, and participating
in campus clubs. These
Ambassadors create a Circle of
Support for each student.**



Rebecca with Next Steps student Jeanne Gavigan at Jeanne's graduation in December 2011

Rebecca Moody is a senior at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN. She has participated in the Next Steps program for three years as a tutor with numerous students. She is currently finishing up her training in special education and is excited about future opportunities working in postsecondary education.