

From Learning to Doing: Mattea's Journey from TECH-Prep to College

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Building Skills for the Future

When Mattea joined TECH-Prep, she became part of a 12-week program designed to help youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities explore technology, strengthen work place readiness skills, and prepare for future education and employment opportunities.

Before joining the program, Mattea expressed an interest in graphic design and digital art. Throughout the program, Mattea participated in interactive learning experiences, including learning about new online tools, real-world roleplay, and hands-on simulations. TECH-Prep focuses on **technology and soft skills**; while technical knowledge can help young people prepare for technology-related careers, TECH-Prep also emphasizes the skills needed to succeed in almost any workplace—communication, teamwork, professionalism, problem-solving, time management, and self-advocacy.

For Mattea, the program provided an opportunity to learn about the expectations of the workplace while practicing those skills in a supportive environment.

Over the course of the 12-week TECH-Prep program, Mattea participated in activities designed to connect what she was learning to situations she could encounter at work. She had opportunities to explore the use of new digital art tools online, and also be exposed to new experiences like the cybersecurity breach simulation. She learned about many potential work opportunities while developing skills such as communicating professionally, following directions, working with others, asking for assistance, and approaching workplace challenges.

Taking TECH-Prep to the Virginia Air & Space Science Center

At the conclusion of the program, she completed a 40-hour summer internship with the Virginia Air & Space Science Center (VASSC). This hands-on, paid experience allowed Mattea to use her skills and knowledge in a work environment that helped her continue to grow and develop her passion for STEM-based careers. TECH-Prep gave Mattea the opportunity to prepare for the next step: thinking about her career goals and applying to colleges.

The internship allowed Mattea to experience a professional work environment and practice the skills she had developed throughout TECH-Prep.

In addition to handling admissions and guiding participants in the theater, Mattea worked hands-on in the booth with the IMAX technology, learning how the camera and sound systems operate, and how to troubleshoot if there were any difficulties. The experience also gave Mattea an opportunity to learn what it means to be part of a workplace: arriving prepared, communicating with supervisors and coworkers, completing assigned responsibilities, and adapting to new situations.

When asked about what she learned the most from TECH-Prep, Mattea said.....

"You can do anything if you put your mind to it, especially if you have a wide support system."

More Than Work Experience

For Mattea, the summer internship represented more than completing 40 hours of paid work experience. It provided an opportunity to put the skills she had practiced throughout TECH-Prep into action in a real-world setting.

The combination of classroom-based learning, technology exploration, mentorship, and hands-on work experience is an important part of the TECH-Prep model. Participants are not simply introduced to careers; they are given opportunities to begin experiencing what employment can look and feel like.

Mattea's experience demonstrates how structured preparation followed by authentic workplace experience can help youth with IDD connect what they learn during a training program with the expectations and possibilities of employment.

"TECH-Prep changed my confidence," she says, "and now I speak out more than usual!"

"There aren't a lot of women in cybersecurity," she said, "and I look forward to being in that field."

Looking Toward What Comes Next

Completing TECH-Prep and the VASSC internship gave Mattea an opportunity to explore her abilities and interests while gaining experience she can carry into future education, training, and employment opportunities. She is currently enrolled in a local community college majoring in cybersecurity with a minor in graphic design, looking to find opportunities to combine her interests.

Her experience also reflects a central goal of TECH-Prep: helping young people with IDD see technology and employment not simply as possibilities to learn about, but as opportunities they can actively pursue.

About the TECH-Prep Program



TECH-Prep combines multiple learning opportunities to help participants prepare for their futures, including:

- A 12-week technology and workplace-readiness program
- Technology and career exploration
- Soft-skill and professional-skill development
- Mentoring and other learning opportunities
- Virtual learning experiences and field trips
- A paid 40-hour summer internship that provides real-world work experience

Through these experiences, TECH-Prep seeks to expand participants' exposure to technology careers while helping them develop skills they can use in future education, training, and employment.

Learn More

Mattea's experience at the Virginia Air & Space Science Center provides an example of how TECH-Prep connects learning with real-world experience. Her journey highlights several important elements of preparing youth with IDD for employment:



- Workplace readiness involves both technical and interpersonal skills.
- Practicing communication, teamwork, professionalism, and problem-solving can help prepare young people for real workplace expectations.
- Internships give participants an opportunity to apply skills rather than only learn about them.
- Exposure to professional environments can help participants explore their interests, strengths, and future career possibilities.
- Combining structured preparation with hands-on work experience can create a bridge between learning about careers and participating in the workforce.

More about research study 3: <https://idd.vcurrctc.org/research/rs3.cfm>

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