Sodexo empowers young people with disabilities with job training at Seminole Cafe

Dave Heller, Special to the Democrat  Published 9:15 a.m. ET Jan. 27, 2020

High school senior Ja'Quez Bivens earns credit hours for his work at FSU's Seminole Café. (Photo: Dave Heller)

Sodexo is teaming up with local high schools to offer students with disabilities a chance to develop marketable job skills through a new job training program at Florida State University’s Seminole Cafe.

Each morning at 9:30, several high school students arrive at the all-you-care-to-eat dining hall. As they put on aprons, hair nets and food service gloves for the three-hour shift, they are eager to get started and grateful to work at FSU.

“They have a smile on their face, they interact with FSU students and help make it a welcoming environment,” said Catherine Hall, PHR, SHRM-CP, human resources manager at Sodexo/Seminole Dining. “It’s important for Sodexo to reach out to people in our community and give them a chance to work. The experience empowers them, boosts their confidence, teaches job skills and gives them a chance to contribute. Plus, they have money to spend in the local economy.”

Hall has led efforts to develop partnerships with more than 20 nonprofits, public schools and state agencies in the Tallahassee area since Sodexo took over dining services at Florida State in spring 2017. The list of partners includes Goodwill Industries, Leon County Schools, FSU’s Dedman School of Hospitality and the Florida Rehabilitation Council for the Blind.

Those connections open the door for high school and college students with developmental or language challenges to work at one of Seminole Dining’s
Ja’Quez Bivens, a senior at Lincoln High School, is getting an opportunity to work and learn at Seminole Café. He’s part of a four-person crew that includes his twin brother, Jakari. One of their first duties of the day is to wipe down dining tables and mop the floor.

They are members of Leon County Schools’ LITE program — Leon’s Intensive Training for Employment — which includes about 25 students. Each weekday, they work at different locations in the community to earn school credits.

Ja’Quez feels fortunate to be in the LITE program. He hopes the experience will boost his job prospects in the future.

"It helps you a lot because you can do different things like clean or cook and learn how to get a job," Bivens said. "I’d like to work here someday."

Aaron Johnson, who oversees Leon County’s LITE program, says the opportunity to work on campus at Florida State can be life-changing for students.

"Sometimes employers put limitations on our students with disabilities, but Sodexo knows how to tap their talents and abilities," Johnson said. "This training helps them develop job skills, and we’ve seen some students turn these unpaid positions into jobs."

Victoria McKinney turned her job training as a student into a job with Sodexo. (Photo: Dave Heller)

That’s exactly what former LITE student Victoria McKinney accomplished. After graduating from the program last year, Sodexo hired her to continue working in the Suwannee Room, one of FSU’s other all-you-care-to-eat dining halls.

McKinney is proud to have a job. She likes to keep track of her paychecks, “I get paid every two weeks,” and she especially enjoys her coworkers.

“The people here are wonderful. They’re all nice to me,” she said. “I want to stay here until I retire. It’s like a home to me.”

Leon County Schools job coach Janie Strzałka has seen a lot of examples like McKinney’s.

Strzałka helps young adults in the Adult Community Education (ACE) program transition into permanent jobs. She works with students with disabilities between the ages of 18 and 22.

“It means a lot to me to see their confidence build to the point where they don’t need you anymore,” Strzałka said. “That’s a bittersweet part of the job, but it’s rewarding to know that they’ve got this.”

Sodexo’s partnerships with organizations dedicated to finding jobs for people with disabilities have resulted in some profound impacts.
Debra Drayton is grateful for her job with Sodexo and has earned a reputation as an exceptional employee. “I hope people understand that there is nothing wrong with me because I have a disability. I can do anything that people with hearing can do.” (Photo: Dave Hellier)

Sodexo employee Debra Drayton says she’s grateful for her job with Seminole Dining. Drayton, who is deaf, lost her last job when the business shut down and finding new work proved challenging. She spent four difficult months out of work until Sodexo hired her through its partnership with the Florida Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

Now, Drayton performs her job with expertise and joy at Florida State. She has built a reputation for spreading smiles and good cheer as she moves through her day at Seminole Dining venues.

“Debra is always working with a smile on her face, and when she smiles you just have no choice but to smile back,” Hall said. “She communicates through sign language, facial or hand expressions, and we can’t imagine having an organization without her. Debra adds a lot to our business.”

Drayton says she’s thankful to have found a new job family and work home.

“I definitely love my job,” she said. “I love to help others and be part of a team.”

Sodexo is proud of its record of reaching out to people with disabilities in its training and hiring protocols.

In 2019, the Florida Rehabilitation Council for the Blind recognized Sodexo with an award for supporting and hiring people who are blind or visually impaired. The council praised Sodexo for creating a barrier-free environment that helps people with disabilities live more independently.

The Florida Agency for Persons with Disabilities honored Sodexo with an Exceptional Employer Award for its continuing support of people with disabilities.

The national publication DiversityInc ranked Sodexo No. 6 in its 2017 list of Top 9 Companies for People with Disabilities.

Sodexo also has earned the Leading Disability Employer Seal from the National Organization on Disability. The distinction honors companies that follow exemplary hiring and employment practices for people with disabilities.

In addition, the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity recognized Sodexo as a leader in the state's Unique Abilities Partner Program.

Hall says Sodexo’s progressive hiring philosophy for people with disabilities benefits the entire Seminole Dining team.

“They learn skills, and we learn how to enhance working relationships with people with unique abilities,” Hall said. “Their transition into the workforce helps us empathize with the uncertainties that everyone faces coming into a new job and learning new tasks. Ultimately, we want everything we do to enhance the quality of life for the people we serve and the people who work for us.”