Old friends reconnected and new friendships were made at the second annual NINJA Leadership Conference for youth with disabilities.

Last June, 10 young people gathered at Utah State University for the first-ever leadership conference for youth with disabilities. They made plans for when—not if—they’d be back for another conference.

To say that first conference was a success would be an understatement. Earlier this week, the original 10 students returned, and they brought 18 more with them.

The NINJA (New Ideas for Networking Junior Advocates) Conference was sponsored by the Utah Statewide Independent Living Council, the Utah Developmental Disabilities Council and the Center for Persons with Disabilities at USU. Youth from all six independent living centers across the state participated in the event.

The idea, said organizer Jeff Sheen, a program coordinator at the CPD, was to help today’s youth become tomorrow’s leaders in disability advocacy.

At check-in Monday afternoon, the youth received “ninja names” and room assignments in the LLC before heading to the USU ropes course for getting-to-know-you games on the ground and more challenging activities like the “flying fox” and “wobbly log.” After a picnic supper, they learned how to be good listeners from Nathan Coats, director of the Cache Valley Transit District.

On Tuesday, breakout sessions included topics such as “Disability Rights, Responsibilities and Voting,” “Leadership Principles from Horton Hears a Who,” and “Internet Safety.” Aggie Games and Aggie Ice Cream on the Quad rounded out the afternoon. Kelie Babcock, who was named Ms. Wheelchair Utah in 2010, gave the banquet keynote address on “Being Unique and Rocking It.” The evening continued with a GPS Scavenger Hunt and a movie under the stars.

Workshops on advocacy, goal setting and project brainstorming rounded out the last day on Wednesday. Each participant

Annie Beach, a returning participant from the Salt Lake City area, talked about what leadership means to her.

“When you’re a leader, a lot of people look up to you and expect you to do the right thing,” she said. It’s important for a leader to make people feel valued and important.

“When I feel like I’m a part of something, I try harder to live up to expectations. It feels good to feel valued,” she said.

After the 2013 conference, Beach began writing letters to legislators and attended a legislative reception sponsored by the Legislative Coalition for People with Disabilities. As a result, she was able to secure sponsorship for herself and another participant at this year’s conference, thanks to Rep. Larry Wiley.

Gordon Richins, the CPD’s consumer advocate, also sponsored a participant.

University Inn and Conference Center staff, led by Tyler Johnson, handled most of the logistics, including activities and Tuesday evening’s banquet.

When it was time to leave Wednesday afternoon, most of the participants (and youth leaders) were exhausted, but agreed the three-day conference was well worth it.

“It was a lot to take in,” said one participant. “It should be a week long!” exclaimed another.

“We’ll be back next year!” said a third.

To see photos of the 2014 NINJA Youth Leadership Conference, visit our Facebook album here.