A PEER participant serves in the Edith Bowen Laboratory School cafeteria. Several work sites offer job experiences within the PEER program.

A job interview is stressful. It induces racing thoughts, a beating heart, sweating palms—but imagine how much worse it would be if you didn’t know how to greet the person who interviews you. How do you shake hands? How much eye contact is appropriate? How do you start and end a conversation? The Post-Secondary Education, Employment and Research program is designed to help young adults with disabilities overcome both social and educational barriers so they can transition from the school system to the adult, working world. For four years, it has provided an environment where young people learn, research happens and volunteerism thrives. "The biggest difference we saw between doing a program like this at college and at a high school is the difference in the behavior of the students," said Kerry Done, the PEER classroom teacher. "The difference between a college freshman and a high school freshman is so great. The PEER students had better role models on campus." Peer mentoring is a trend repeated throughout the United States, where 58 four-year and 60 two-year colleges offer a post-secondary school program. The PEER program at USU offers work experience and opens a door for students with developmental disabilities, allowing them to participate in post-secondary education if they choose. "It gives the students the opportunity to be with their age mates," said Dr. Sarah Rule, a former CPD director who is now the program’s campus liason. Project PEER is a collaborative effort between the Cache and Logan school districts and Utah State University (including the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation, the CPD and the Disability Resource Center). It is one of several transitional programs in the school districts for post-high school students with disabilities. It has contributed to the conversation and research done on transition: one of the hottest and most worrisome topics in special education. Under federal law, a student with developmental disabilities may receive special education services through the public schools until they turn 22. After that, they step into an adult world governed by different rules, services and responsibilities. Nationally, many people with developmental disabilities are leaving high school and “falling into a chasm,” said Dr. Robert Morgan, who serves on the PEER advisory board. The numbers back him up: in a recently released study, Easter Seals revealed that only 11% of parents of adult children with disabilities say their child is employed full time. Project PEER is the subject of three of Morgan's research projects. He and other professionals agree: social skills are a formidable barrier to many young people with disabilities who want to land and keep a job. And while role-playing in the classroom helps, it doesn't always translate to good skills outside the classroom. That behavior is reinforced by typically-developing peers who serve as mentors. The participants also come in contact with their age group as they use their university activity cards. "The university program helps to let you learn how to do things by yourself," said Michael, a participant interviewed in a recent article published in the Utah Special Educator. "I mean, not fast like college students… I can’t do that. But being here is good because I get confidence and after maybe two years, maybe I can take a class, too."
Another PEER focus is to give participants job experiences on work sites—which helps them to know not only what they like about certain tasks, but also what they don’t like. They also learn daily living skills like walking to work or taking the bus. Students who are placed in PEER must have good behavior and self-motivation.

The program employs one full-time teacher and several aides. The job coaches and mentors are also young adults—and they help model the skills that participants should learn, like how to play a card game or take criticism gracefully.

The goal is to not only have the students in the campus environment, but to have them access it more meaningfully, said Dr. David Forbush, the special education director for Cache County School District. After seeing the positive effect that the campus environment had on PEER students, the Cache school district began bringing students from its other post-high programs to USU as well. They may come on campus to eat at the Hub, for example.

The school districts also share information with the university, making sure students' placements are appropriate whether they are in PEER or another post-high program offered through a school district.

"Ultimately it's about preparation for life after school," said John Cardis, secondary life skills coordinator of the Cache County School District. Students who are not likely to find jobs on campus may be better served in another program that offers experiences similar to the life they will have as an adult. Even after students are assigned to PEER, the program’s team may decide to change assignments to ensure they are where they should be.

"It’s been a wonderful partnership that grew out of people who wanted to see this happen," said Dr. Rule.

Sasha, one of the program’s participants, came to the program because she was struggling in school. “The teachers are really great and they help me out a lot,” she said. Her work experience in the program includes washing down tables in the Edith Bowen cafeteria. She leaves the program in June, so she’s looking for a permanent job.

Students’ needs are addressed both when they enter and exit the program. As they leave, the PEER program establishes connections between the student and adult services.

The goal is to make sure students who leave the program are either employed or moving on to post-secondary education.