

# Case Study: Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts' Access Ambassador Initiative

Visit Lincoln Center's Accessibility webpage [here](#).

## Program Summary

Lincoln Center's Access Ambassador program is a job training and performing arts awareness initiative for high school students with disabilities. It is an offshoot of their Ambassador program, a large network of volunteers who provide front-of-house support at performances by greeting guests, giving directions, and assisting with other initiatives.



- The program aims to diversify the Ambassador pool and emphasize inclusive hiring practices across Lincoln Center.
- Lincoln Center's Accessibility team partners with several New York City high schools to provide job skills training and awareness of career opportunities in performing arts for students with developmental disabilities.
  - The program is aimed at students ages 14-21 with developmental disabilities who are transitioning from school to independent adulthood.
  - Each Access Ambassador semester lasts nine weeks, and consists of job skills training sessions as well as on-the-job experience.
- Job skills training sessions take place once a week for one hour at the partner schools.
  - Training sessions focus on topics from customer service, communication and teamwork, to job readiness skills like interview and mock interviewing and identifying career choices.
- Access Ambassadors have the opportunity to work up to 1 or 2 shifts per week at Lincoln Center, where they can put their skills to practice in front-of-house positions at a variety of Lincoln Center venues.

- In addition to receiving feedback from their supervisors, students complete self-evaluation forms at the end of each shift, to practice identifying their own areas of strength and areas where they may need improvement.
- In the program's first few semesters, Lincoln Center Accessibility staff conducted training sessions while also providing administrative support for the program.
  - In upcoming semesters, Lincoln Center will hire a part-time job coach who can conduct in-school training and supervise Access Ambassador shifts.

## Program Profile

### Overview

Lincoln Center's Access Ambassador initiative began in Summer 2016 with the goal of providing young adults with developmental disabilities hands-on work experience in the performing arts as front-of-house volunteers. The Access Ambassadors grew out of



Lincoln Center's existing Ambassador program, an extensive network of volunteers who support full- and part-time front of house staff at all of Lincoln Center's venues by greeting guests, providing directions, and assisting with any additional tasks to make visitors feel welcome. The Accessibility team saw this established program as a potential introduction to working in the arts for transition aged students, and piloted its first partnership with P94M - The Spectrum School, in Lower Manhattan. Since its inception, the program has grown from one to three school partnerships. Because the nature of front-of-house work requires being on one's feet for at least two hours at a time and spontaneous language to answer guests' questions, the Access Ambassador program is targeted primarily towards students ages 14 and up who are both mobile and able to communicate verbally.

### Access Ambassador Curriculum

The Access Ambassador program offers volunteer opportunities similar to those offered for the previously established Ambassador program, with the added component of a



weekly job skills curriculum. Each semester lasts nine weeks, and covers broad job readiness topics like professionalism and taking initiative, as well as job skills specific to front-of-house work at Lincoln Center, like accessibility assistance, handling difficult guests, and familiarity with specific venues at which students worked. The curriculum also incorporates informational interviews with other Lincoln Center staff members in various departments, such as security guards, maintenance staff, individuals responsible for music and theater programming, and sound and lighting technicians. These informational interviews served a dual purpose of allowing students to practice their interviewing skills while also gaining an understanding of different career paths in the arts and the collaborative nature of working in a performing arts venue.

### On-the-Job Experience

Access Ambassadors are given one to two opportunities per week to work a front-of-house shift at a Lincoln Center event, although there is currently no minimum or maximum requirement for number of shifts worked. Each shift lasts approximately two hours; the students arrive about an hour and a half before the event begins and can either leave once it has begun or stay to watch the performance if there is seating available. Shifts begin with a team briefing, which includes information about that shift’s performance and the other staff working, along with answers to frequently asked questions, such as, “What time does the show start/end?” or “Where is the bathroom?” (A sample briefing document and visual schedule for a shift are included in the “Additional Resources” section at the end of this case study.) Students get a short break after their briefing, and then take up their posts at the venue entrance, where they greet guests and hand out brochures or other promotional materials until the audience is seated and the performance has begun. An Accessibility team member shadows the Access Ambassadors throughout their shift, which ends with a 15-minute debrief. This debrief gives students a chance to receive feedback on their performance from their supervisor.

### Self-Evaluation

Throughout the semester, students are encouraged to evaluate their own performance and identify strengths and areas of

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Guests</b></p>  <p style="text-align: center;"><b>I was helpful to guests, and listened.</b></p>	On My Own	With 1 or 2 Reminders	With 3 or 4 Reminders	With 5 or more Reminders
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Energy</b></p>  <p style="text-align: center;"><b>I felt awake and excited to work.</b></p>	On My Own	With 1 or 2 Reminders	With 3 or 4 Reminders	With 5 or more Reminders

improvement. Their end-of-shift debriefs always include a self-assessment form, which asks students to assign a number from 1 (“I did this with 5 or more reminders”) to 4 (“I did this on my own”) to a series of different skills used during that shift, including initiative, speaking voice, professionalism, energy, and interaction with guests. At the end of the rubric, one page is dedicated to a “Glow,” something that each student felt they did well during the shift, and “Grow,” something that they could improve for next time. (A full self-assessment rubric is included in the “Additional Resources” section at the end of this case study.)

## **School Partnerships**

The school partnership model differs slightly from school to school depending on the students’ needs and goals. Students from P94M attend every shift with a teacher or parent, while students from another partnership school, 721Q, travel to and attend shifts on their own. All partnership schools provide space at their school for the program’s weekly training sessions and handle communication with students’ families. There is no cost to the schools for their students to participate in the Access Ambassador program.

## **Highlighting Best Practices**

### **Teach skills-based lessons in a way that allows students to really practice the task you’re teaching them.**

Learning about a skill in the environment where that skill will be used and with the materials you’d need to use that skill makes it much easier for people with developmental differences to translate these skills to their daily lives. Action based learning in addition to verbal explanation and visual aids help students make the cognitive leap from a lesson to a life or job skill. By having nearly 20 opportunities per semester to work a front-of-house shift at Lincoln Center, Access Ambassadors have many opportunities to put the skills they learn in job trainings into practice.

### **Use strong visual aids to help students process new information.**

At their training sessions each week, students are provided with a “Visual Vocabulary” handout that illustrates key concepts discussed in each class. The job coach goes through each concept and its illustration to discuss why that illustration relates to the concept; for example, students are asked to discuss why an image of a man holding a door open might be the visual aid used for the concept of “professionalism.” A copy of one of these documents is available in the “Additional Resources” section of this case study.

## **Be explicit about the skills and abilities participants will need to participate in your program.**

All job, internship, or volunteer descriptions benefit from specificity about who they are looking for; this should be no different when working with individuals with developmental disabilities. In order to reach students who would gain the most from this opportunity, the Accessibility team realized they needed to define specific parameters around who they could serve.

*“The list of attributes that we’re looking for in an ideal candidate was driven by a meeting we had with Natalie McQueen from the District 75 Transition Office... She said, ‘As you’re pitching this program out to schools, you need to really help them select the right students for it...’ So she had a huge hand in helping us... structure it and to say not every student is going to be good for this... We went to four or five other schools, and some of them we could totally move forward with when they’re ready, and some of them have non-ambulatory, non-verbal students. We were really trying to find a place where that type of candidate fit, and we weren’t able to find the right job for them yet, because our job is so heavily based on spontaneous language and standing. So that was really helpful, to know that we can’t be all things to all people yet.”*

-Miranda Appelbaum, Assistant Director of Accessibility and Guest Services at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts

## **Adapt curriculum and expectations to individual participants’ needs and goals, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all model.**

Not all students will have the same goals for a program, nor will they have the same skill levels upon entering a program. Creating solid lesson plans for trainings and structures for job shifts has been crucial to the Access Ambassador program's success, but so has flexibility within those structures.

*“We do have some students... who are really just here for exposure: getting to know new people, getting to be around different things in a new space. And we have some students who are looking at job postings for ushers, and thinking about applying for jobs. So some students really benefit from coming [to shifts at Lincoln Center] once or twice, having a point of reference, coming into the city on the train, all of those things, and then some students are really actively working on their skills. So I think one thing we need to figure out administratively is how do we best support their goals, and what are realistic time commitments for them*

*based on the goals that they have. I don't think there will be a one size fits all 'you have to complete one shift a week' going forward. But it's also hard when they don't come very often because we can't really build on their progress."*

-Miranda Appelbaum, Assistant Director of Accessibility and Guest Services at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts

## **Building strong partnerships allows for a program's sustainability and long-term growth.**

In developing the Access Ambassador curriculum, the Accessibility Team at Lincoln Center worked closely with teachers at their partnership schools. Seeing the way the teachers worked with their students influenced the way the Accessibility Team taught their curriculum and designed resources; they even incorporated language used in the students' classrooms into their reflections to make it easier on students to learn new job-specific skills.

*"We also learned a great deal from the way that [the teachers] talked to the students. It made a huge difference in our communication style; it really shortened the learning curve. We were able to progress with them much more quickly because we knew the way that they were learning in school. For example, we were talking about things that we did well and things to improve, and he said that the school uses the term "glow and grow," so we started using the language that the school used."*

-Miranda Appelbaum, Assistant Director of Accessibility and Guest Services at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts

*"There have been continuations of conversations that we've been having in trainings and at shifts when we're not there. For instance, our assessment that we put together for the students to work through on their own, we saw today that the transition coordinator had actually adapted it slightly, and I'm not sure if he was going over it with the students when we weren't there, but he had added [onto it]. He helped us... with the documents we were using with the students to make them more successful."*

-Katie Fanning, Coordinator of Guest Services and Accessibility at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts

## **Offer leadership and modeling opportunities that connect with other programs in your organization for younger participants.**

Lincoln Center's Passport to the Arts program offers free tickets to workshops and performances for families who have children with developmental disabilities. The Access Ambassadors often work front-of-house shifts for Passport events, which allows for a connection between the younger Passport audiences and the older students in the Access Ambassador program. This also ensures that if an Access Ambassador wants to stay for the performance after their shift, it will be accessible to them, since any necessary accommodations have already been made for Passport participants.

*"With the Passport program, it allows our families, as they come to performances, to see sometimes older versions of their children... Our Access Ambassadors are definitely modeling behavior for the younger children who are coming, which is pretty magical. Also with the Passport program... if there's a tour, [the Access Ambassadors] are part of the tour; if there's a performance, they attend the performance too. So in that way it's sort of an extension of the Passport program, in allowing these students to see these works of art."*

-Katie Fanning, Coordinator of Guest Services and Accessibility at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts

## **Offer staff trainings and opportunities for other departments to get involved.**

The Access Ambassador training program incorporates informational interviews with Lincoln Center staff of all levels and from a variety of departments. Asking staff and volunteers outside of the Accessibility department to participate with the program makes them feel that their work is valued and gives an opportunity for the students to gain a broader perspective of the many different jobs that exist to make a performing arts venue operate smoothly.

*"...what we are saying to the students is that we want you to understand entry level, we want you to understand the basics of what a porter or a security guard does, and I think what we're asking is sort of an equalizing experience. So we're putting the same kind of emphasis on snow cleanup as we are on the person who runs the sound board, on the person who does front of house, on programming - we're sort of treating the staff with a lot of reverence for what they contribute to make a show happen, and we really stress that teamwork with the students. I think that there's something really nice about asking security guards*

*what they do every day because they don't get those questions very much. And the Ambassadors, too - we're really respecting their experience and their volunteer hours in a way that I don't know that we do in other ways. This program has been a nice way of getting value in all of the different ways that we work together and contribute towards a common goal."*

-Miranda Appelbaum, Assistant Director of Accessibility and Guest Services at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts

## **Additional Resources**

["The Score" Article about the Access Ambassador Initiative](#)

[Lincoln Center Access Ambassador Briefing - Template for Atrium](#)

[Lincoln Center Access Ambassador Self Assessment Rubric](#)

[Lincoln Center Access Ambassador Visual Schedule Template](#)

[Lincoln Center Access Ambassador Sample Training Handout](#)

[Lincoln Center Access Ambassador Visual Vocabulary Training Handout](#)