October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM), an awareness-building campaign held annually since 1945. Throughout this month (and all year long!), our fellow community members with disabilities are being celebrated for their contributions to the workforce. Extra attention is being drawn toward barriers that may limit employment opportunities for people with disabilities, and energy is being directed toward innovative solutions to access barriers. NDEAM’s theme for 2014 is “Expect. Employ. Empower.”

The disability studies and person-centered-planning scholar John O’Brien says that we can experience multiple types of poverty in our lives: poverty of money, poverty of friendships, and poverty of meaning. When people are not supported and welcomed into the world of work, they risk facing poverty in each of these three domains. Work not only offers financial security; it lends meaning to our days and brings friendships into our lives. Here at University of Rochester we are proud to house a number of initiatives focused on supporting self-determination, citizenship, and employment for people with disabilities.

The Institute for Innovative Transition (IIT) at the Warner School of Education works to improve the quality of life for people with developmental disabilities as they transition from school age to adulthood. IIT is home to the New York State Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSiD) initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education, which established or expanded inclusive college programs at several campuses in our region, including University of Rochester. Employment is a central focus and expected outcome of TPSiDs nationwide. For more about IIT, contact Martha Mock, Director of IIT, at website.

University of Rochester Medical Center is home to Strong Center for Developmental Disabilities (SCDD), a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. SCDD houses Partnerships in Employment: New York, which strives to increase competitive and inclusive employment opportunities for people with disabilities across the state. As part of this work, SCDD acts as the New York State coordinator for Project SEARCH™, a national employment training program for individuals with disabilities. SCDD is also working with the Golisano Foundation to bring to Rochester, “I’m in to Hire,” a national program to engage businesses in recognizing the benefits of hiring people with disabilities. To learn more, contact Susan Hetherington, SCDD’s Co-Director of SCDD, at website.

Rochester Center for Community Leadership (RCCL) is the campus home for Transition Opportunities at University of Rochester (TOUR). TOUR offers students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) the opportunity to attend college. This initiative is a partnership of the Institute for Innovative Transition, Monroe #1 BOCES, Lifetime Assistance, Inc., and RCCL. Through TOUR, students with IDD pursue a college experience aligned with that of traditionally-enrolled undergraduates: they participate in college classes, internships, and social activities on campus with the support of their BOCES teachers and staff as well as undergraduate peer mentors and academic coaches. Upon completion of their college experience, TOUR students are supported as they enter into competitive and inclusive employment. For more information about TOUR, contact Catherine Lewis, Assistant Director at Rochester Center for Community Leadership, at website.

Throughout our campus, professors are critically engaging students in learning about disability, inclusion, and civil rights. Our Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) is actively supporting UR students with disabilities as they get the accommodations and supports they need to engage fully in college. UR students, staff, faculty, and community partners are coming together to support inclusion in all facets of our community. Collectively, we are changing the landscape around disability, inclusion, and employment. As this year's NDEAM theme reminds us, we must hold great expectations for our fellow citizens with disabilities. We must continue to empower each other and value the assets and perspectives people with disabilities bring to the American workforce.