

College Supports for Students with ASD: Now and Looking Forward

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The necessity of a college education as an entrant to anything but a minimum wage job is well documented (Farrington, R. 2014). With the increasing number of students entering college with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Pinder-Amaker, S. 2014), professionals have begun to turn their attention to the needs for special supports to ensure successful outcomes. Beginning in 2010 or 2011, these programs have begun to take root across the country. It is important to take a look at some of the successful programs currently in operation on college campuses, how they are funded and sustained, and how they demonstrate that there is evidence that they are succeeding. There is an ever increasing need to demonstrate that these programs are "evidence based" if they are to continue to succeed and expand.

ASD Program at Purchase College

Dr. Lauren Greiner, clinical psychologist, is the driving force behind the ASD program at Purchase College, State University of New York. Nine years ago, Dr. Greiner developed this program as an offshoot of a program serving students with psychological disabilities already in place



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on campus. Dr. Greiner worked earnestly for the need for more specialized services for students with ASD. To this end, she continued the college's collaboration with a private funding organization (The FAR Fund) to support her efforts. Beginning with 12 students, Lauren now serves more than 50 students on the campus. This program is now funded by both SUNY Pur-

chase and the FAR Fund. To understand what makes this program so successful, one needs to look at both "qualitative" and "quantitative evidence."

Dr. Greiner has been running the program at SUNY Purchase for almost a decade; the program currently serving approximately 50 students. She estimates (based on faculty and student reports) that there are another 100 students on the campus who do not want to identify themselves with any sort of "disability," and this is one of her greatest challenges. Dr. Greiner's program is highly comprehensive. It provides academic and transition support (especially to those entering as freshmen), a social network, education of staff regarding the nature of her student's issues, internship development, and career development. Dr. Greiner is assisted by graduate interns in psychology and a large group of peer mentors. This enables the program to provide individual case management. What is particularly striking is Dr. Greiner's attention to building community for her students. Many students entering college with ASD are fearful of attending social events secondary to social anxiety. Speaking of one student in her program, Dr. Greiner commented, "I don't think he ever had a friend before entering the program." Dr. Greiner runs weekly social groups for students and maintains a closed Facebook page so that students can easily connect with one another. Dr. Greiner encourages the students

to invite their friends to events sponsored by the program. This, in turn, integrates the students with the student body at large.

From 2008 to 2011, the program was exclusively funded by the FAR Fund. Beginning in 2012, SUNY Purchase contributed to the expenses of the program. Approximately 30% of the operating budget is contributed by the college. The program runs largely on a three-year renewable grant. Continued funding is an ever present source of concern.

Statistically, what are the results? Students in this program have an average of a 3.21 GPA, higher than the school at large. Data to date, based on tracking of one incoming freshman class, show that close to 80% graduate in 8 semesters and 20% of the students graduate in 9 semesters. Importantly, some students in this freshman class either withdrew or transferred. As the data indicate, academics for Dr. Greiner's students are usually not the problem. As Dr. Greiner says, "It has to be a community" with social events, and game nights. Students consider themselves beyond "social skills training." Therefore teaching has to be done "organically, in real-world situations." Dr. Greiner also reports that students who don't come for help early don't do as well as students as others. Some students participate in her program for two years, and some for all four years.

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Whereas it is relatively easy to quantify GPA and graduation, it is much more difficult to qualitatively provide evidence of success, beyond anecdotal data. For example, how many students may have dropped out were it not for the supports of this program? How many students made friendships, joined clubs, and participated in other social events for the first time? Certainly these are precursors to the social skills needed to successfully navigate the work place. Moreover, they are the experiences almost all successful college students engage in.

needs/limitations of each student. The program is funded by government agencies (including Medicare) and private donors.

With regard to outcomes, College Steps documents the grades for a student at the end of each semester. The average grade for all community college students is reportedly a "B." In order to measure independence, the program administers the Adaptive Behavior Assessment II to all students. Employment data is just beginning to be aggregated, as many students have not graduated from the programs in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Virginia. For Vermont graduates, based on 26 students who have completed the program, 87% of these

than 10 students. The program now serves 60 students in the greater New York area (Long Island, New York City, Westchester, and Northern New Jersey). New Frontiers is a private, for-profit company whose mission is similar to the programs described above. The goals are to increase independence, self-advocacy skills, and academic learning, and to improve executive function and social interaction. Executive function includes time management, planning, and learning to break assignments into manageable segments. The program includes a two week college readiness program to ease the transition from high school to college. It is highly personalized so that each

Koffler and Feinman, what makes their program successful (continuous growth, with new offices potentially opening in White Plains and Northern New Jersey), is the relationship between coaches and students. For students who are not comfortable identifying themselves with a disability, this model offers students privacy. Importantly, these students are at a higher risk for failure, according to Dr. Greiner at Purchase College.

With so many students with ASD college bound, colleges and universities are increasingly including special support programs for these students. Several questions remain, including how these programs will