

Help for when college years are not so carefree

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Alissa Hasson and Abbie Hultquist steer a cart through the aisles of a Skokie supermarket – two new college roommates weighing the merits of M&Ms vs. Kit-Kat bars.

The task may seem simple, but it's designed to teach the 19-year-olds teamwork and how to shop within a budget. It's also part of orientation activities for a post-secondary program geared to students with learning and emotional disorders, believed to be the first of its kind in the Chicago area, experts say.

These are students of average to above-average intelligence who benefited from years of special-education programs and other services. But now, through the program, they have a community of family members, mental health professionals, tutors and others who understand their limitations. Called College Living Experience, the Nashville-based enterprise has a tuition that hovers around \$33,000 a year – and that doesn't cover classes, books, room or board. The money does not buy ivy-covered buildings, richly paneled libraries or a massive football stadium. Instead, CLE offers scaffolding: intensive help with studies, independent-living and social skills.

The inaugural class of 11, all from Illinois, struggle with ADD, Asperger's syndrome, high-functioning autism and special needs that make it difficult to navigate life in the typical dorm or frat house.

Students live in one- and two-bedroom apartments across from Oakton Community College's Skokie campus and near a support team that can quickly intervene when life unravels.

"I was so nervous when I moved in," said Hasson, of Northbrook, who "bombed out" in her first college attempt. "New environments scare me. But it really helps to have someone to go to when I get stressed."

Hasson wants to be a police officer. Hultquist of Highland Park would like to try acting. The remaining students envision futures in education, computers and business.

While academics are important, it is practical life skills – organizing their apartments, understanding time and money and, especially, making and keeping friends – that can be more challenging.

So, not long after the boxes were unpacked last week, a learning specialist visited each apartment, bringing along simple tools for everyday survival: a red glass bowl to hold keys, cell phones and wallets and a canvas bag to divide junk mail from bills. Each student got a debit card holding just enough money for one week and color-coded markers to distinguish materials from different classes. Few students juggle more than three courses.

“They are so easily overwhelmed,” said Judith Gethner, director of the Skokie site. “If you give them too much at one time, they’ll just shut down.”

Nationally, only about 13 percent of young people with these “invisible” disabilities attend college, according to the U.S. Department of Education. (In another era, they dropped out of high school and headed to factories, steel mills and other well-paying blue-collar jobs that have all but vanished from America’s landscape). The fact that these young people are mentally and physically able but still have profound deficits means they don’t fit easily into existing categories. One other school in Illinois, Brehm Preparatory School in Carbondale, serves this population.

In a way, they are pioneers because there is little data on outcomes. But as more researchers zero in on diagnosis and treatment of these impairments, there is growing awareness these young people desperately need post-secondary options that will lead to jobs and independence.

“Typically, they develop psychiatric and other behaviors – such as depression and addictions – that are even more troubling. Or they end up back on Mom and Dad’s doorstep,” said Matt Cohen, a Chicago attorney who specializes in special-education issues. “You’re better off [in terms of programs] with a kid who has severe mental illness or Down syndrome than a kid in between.”

Before high school graduation, the students are eligible for services under federal law. Once they get their diplomas, the programs usually come to an abrupt halt, leaving them without assistance at the most dangerous time—a situation that should concern all citizens, not just their parents, Cohen said. From a public policy standpoint, schools have invested tens of thousands of dollars in these students, but without adequate support, that investment can be squandered, he said.

“These kids don’t have the skills to take it to the next step. So, you’ve gone from someone who might be a productive member of society to one who might need lifelong services. It’s a tragic waste,” he said.

Since her daughter left high school, finding the answer to “what’s next?” has been a constant worry, said Marlee Hasson, Alissa’s mother and a social worker.

“You want what’s best for your kid; you want them to reach their potential. But you can’t just send these kids off to college. There’s just too much turmoil,” she said.

That’s one reason this program aggressively expanded, said Mark Claypool, chief executive officer of Educational Services of America, the company that bought CLE two years ago.

Founded in 1989 by psychologist Irene Spalter, who was leading a social skills group for young adults with borderline cognitive abilities, CLE started in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. In 2006, sites were launched in Denver and Austin, Texas. This year, Monterey, Calif., Washington, D.C., and Skokie joined the roster. But the tools provided by the program won’t necessarily help the students find a peer group. Many are unable to read social cues. All of them are intimately familiar with the sting of rejection.

“In junior high, I would get physically or verbally abused on a daily basis,” recalled Hultquist, tearing up at the memory. “I would eat lunch sitting at one of those big tables all by myself.”

Like many CLE youths, Hultquist credits her parents with getting her through school, constantly feeding her a steady stream of optimism to counter a battered self-esteem. When she was drawn into a fight with a tormentor that resulted in a suspension right before 8th-grade graduation, her father responded not with a reprimand, but with soothing words about how much he believed in her.

“Everything I do now is to make my parents proud of me,” she said.

But in a conventional college environment, no one cares if you show up for class or dinner, making it easy to retreat to your room, spending long hours playing video games, watching TV or just sleeping.

Safeguards against isolation are built into CLE. A 7,000-square-foot student center on Lincoln Avenue serves as a meeting place, where everyone is required to come for tutoring. Someone is monitoring class attendance and stopping by the apartments three times a week. Most evenings, students plan social events, from movies to pot-lucks. A peer support staff – graduate students in psychology – is a discreet part of the mix.

For all their vulnerabilities, these students have families with resources. The \$33,000 tab only covers CLE services; other expenses are extra, bringing the total to \$45,000 to \$50,000 – more than a year at Harvard.

“It’s a lot for a community college, but I see this as an investment . . . a way to live independently and be successful,” said Marlee Hasson. “How can you put a price tag on peace of mind?”

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