
UNIVERSITIES REACH OUT

Autism no longer an obstacle for students seeking college degree

Mentors, trained teachers help students to see success

BY ROBIN ERB • FREE PRESS EDUCATION WRITER • March 10, 2008

If college were purely academic, 16-year-old Cullen Kappel would have no worries.

But the mostly straight-A student who studies astrophysics just for fun knows his challenge at college will be in what happens between classes.

Cullen has Asperger's syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism. Like others with Asperger's, he tends to hyper-focus on topics, can be thrown off-kilter with a slight change to his routine and has a tough time deciphering conversation cues.

"I feel a bit socially challenged," said the junior at Clarkston High School.

Now, universities across the state and the country are reaching out to students with autism and related disorders as their numbers grow rapidly -- thanks to early treatment of the disorders in children.

The schools are setting up peer mentoring programs, having one-on-one interventions and working with housing officials, campus security and professors to help them understand why some students might seem quirky, rude or out of place.

Students with Asperger's syndrome are some of the highest-functioning among those with autism, many with above-average intelligence, "all the way to brilliant," said Jane Thierfeld Brown, director of student services at the University of Connecticut's law school. She's coauthoring a book, "Students with Asperger's Syndrome in Higher Education."

But the disorder also short-circuits the part of the brain responsible for executive functioning, making it difficult to organize and prioritize -- keys to academic success.

Physical idiosyncrasies -- hand-flapping, for example -- can make people with Asperger's appear eccentric.

And conversational cues -- plays on words, facial features, hand gestures -- pass by unrecognized.

So Brandon Goyings, a 22-year-old Oakland University student from Jackson, sometimes doesn't get jokes.

"I think more concrete, less abstract," he said.

And it's something that threatens academic success. An autistic student might not be able to read a professor's cues or decipher a lab partner's annoyance at his outbursts or quirky habits.

"College expects you to come with a certain skill set ... but this is a communication disability," said Linda Sisson, director of Oakland University's new peer assistance program for students with autism.

More students in college

Students with autism were graduating from college long before many of today's outreach efforts began.

But university disabilities offices say more of those students are heading to college than ever after a decade or more of early intervention, parental advocacy and federally mandated mainstreaming into regular classrooms.

Steven Schwartz, an associate professor of special education at Madonna University, noted that "15 or 20 years ago, the idea of including an autistic kid in a general education classroom was craziness. Now it's not only an expectation, it's the law."

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one in 150 8-year-olds has some autism spectrum disorder.

And in her survey of 80 institutions across the country last year, Thierfeld Brown said four-year schools had an average of 10 students who reported to their schools' disabilities offices that they had some form of autism. But she estimates the number is much higher because many students don't report their diagnosis.

Tailor-made programs

In Michigan, Oakland University has offered courses for years for teachers and other

professionals who want to work with students with autism.

Now it's wrapping services around its students with the disorder, starting with a peer support program for students like Goyings.

To address the organizational challenges and the need for tangible direction, students with autism paired with other students and received a daily planner. They broke down a semester's worth of assignments into daily chunks and listed every task of the day -- sometimes even eating and exercising.

To hone communication skills, the students meet weekly to practice what they have learned about conversation intricacies -- from beginning a conversation to registering smiles and frowns.

Mia Evans, a 22-year-old political science and journalism major from Detroit, mentors a 22-year-old student with autism from Orchard Lake. Evans asks her mentee about classes and homework. She helps the student replay conversations, searching for clues that the student is faltering.

"We don't sugarcoat the campus experience," Evans said, but "we give them a reference point."

Success in school

Even universities that don't have programs tailored for students with autism have made adjustments for them.

Since they can get easily distracted -- or at the other end, fixated -- some disabilities offices work with professors during final exams week to find a quiet room for the autistic test-taker.

Tim Hull, a 22-year-old Grass Lake student with autism, expects to graduate from the University of Michigan this spring with a double major, but it hasn't been without plenty of challenges.

He has trouble parsing questions on a test or splitting a semester's project into daily tasks. He gave up on taking notes in class, finding himself consumed with writing instead of digesting the lecture.

He sometimes works on projects for several days straight with just a few hours of sleep.

"I tend to do everything full force or not at all," he said.

For others, the most pivotal battle is in building relationships. Because they can seem to be eccentric or rude, autistic students often are isolated, frustrated and ultimately

depressed. It's a road map to dropping out of school.

At Grand Valley State University, Amy Matthews, the project director for the State Wide Autism Resources & Training program, recruited students from her classes to invite an autistic classmate to movies and football games.

She and others who work with students with autism say they have gained crucial ground - people are starting to recognize the disorder rather than reeling from it.

At the University of Connecticut, Thierfeld Brown said she recently explained to someone outside her school that she worked with students with Asperger's.

"He said 'Oh, my neighbor's kid has that,' " she said, adding: "Five years ago, it would have been 'Asparagus-what?' "

Contact **ROBIN ERB** at 313-222-2708 or rerb@freepress.com.

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