

College: An Option for People with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities

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Article:

In August of every year, a familiar scene unfolds in communities across the nation. The exodus from home communities to college campuses has begun! This is an exciting, but anxiety-producing time for many young adults. It is a time of letting go for their parents.

Visualize cars loaded down with the trappings for a college dorm, the student seeing their college housing complexes, parents carrying all those boxes in, and the newly minted freshmen surveying the landscape nervously but with happy anticipation. A student sees possibilities at every turn, but the parent is conflicted about the “launch.” Sons and daughters convince moms and dads that it is time to leave. It is a benchmark event in most young adults’ lives as record numbers of graduates continue their education after high school.

A NEW BEGINNING

Now, take in this scene at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). The influx of students to UNCG this past August broke enrollment records; however, there is a unique feature that UNCG boasts in their services to students that few observers would be able to discern. Among the new freshmen are students with intellectual disabilities. In fact, there are returning students with intellectual disabilities who have flourished on the UNCG campus for the previous two years. The beauty of this scene is the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities with their peers in a very ordinary life phase for young adults. Such is the partnership of UNCG and Beyond Academics, an extraordinary collaboration of postsecondary education for students with intellectual disabilities in North Carolina.

Beyond Academics is a private, nonprofit human services agency dedicated to supporting and instructing young adults with intellectual disabilities who hope to advance their education after high school. Life coaching and support are provided on campus, in collegiate housing complexes, and in the community in partnership with UNCG. Beyond Academics at UNCG is North Carolina’s first progressive and inclusive higher education site in a university community for young adults with intellectual disabilities.

The planning initiative started in 2004 with a foundation of community grassroots activism, represented by students with intellectual disabilities, parents, and other community stakeholders in Forsyth County. The stakeholders did not need gap analysis data to know there was a problem. They knew, firsthand, the dearth of inclusive community capacity that supports growth for young adults with intellectual disabilities. Committee members learned of a few postsecondary education programs in collegiate settings in other states through some national contacts. There was an urgency to get started with the development of a program in North Carolina.

Beyond Academics was an “out of the box” idea, initially difficult to sell as a viable long-term option. However the planning committee persisted, with one community provider agency stepping forward to offer incubation of this novel concept in his own business. Charles Hines and Son, Inc. of Winston-Salem provided the seed funding for start-up of the concept. As a parent of a son with autism, Andy Hines, president and CEO of Hines and Son, Inc. could clearly envision the promise of such an option for young adults leaving high school. The first order of business was to engage a willing college as a partner. UNC Greensboro has a reputation for embracing campus diversity and is willing to stretch for innovation. Thus, when approached with the idea, UNCG leadership asked the necessary and hard questions regarding Beyond Academics, and then they stepped out on a limb of uncharted territory in North Carolina education.

An equally important task was to convince state agencies that a postsecondary education pilot program was a good risk. The concept was articulated to the North Carolina Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Abuse Services, the North Carolina Division of Medical Assistance, and the North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities as a promising practice for young adults with intellectual/developmental disabilities. These state partners shared the vision and moved ahead with technical and other resources to start the program with eight students in August 2007.

Being a college freshman has taken on a new definition in North Carolina with the advent of Beyond Academics. What is a presumed practice for many young adults is now an opportunity for young adults with intellectual disabilities. Most families never imagined that this day would come for their sons and daughters with intellectual disabilities. Indeed this opportunity, as stated so eloquently by a parent of a charter Beyond Academics student, is a linchpin in assuring social justice and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Education and training create a level playing field for our country’s citizens, with a significant impact on opportunity and quality of life. Access to postsecondary education is a necessity for *all* citizens.

THE NEED VALIDATED

The gap in viable postsecondary education options is a “hot button” topic across the nation. The North Carolina Institute of Medicine has conducted a comprehensive study on transitions for people with developmental disabilities and intellectual disabilities. Based on 2007 North Carolina Department of Public Instruction data, at least 50% of North Carolina students with intellectual disabilities, in the year following the completion of secondary education, are not connected with employment or postsecondary education.¹ This is not unique to North Carolina. Unfortunately, across the nation scores of young adults with intellectual disabilities are reaching a veritable dead end after high school.

Much feedback from prominent advocacy groups such as the National Down Syndrome Support Network, the National Down Syndrome Congress, and The Arc of the United States about a growing crisis has alerted policymakers. The US Administration on Developmental Disabilities, in partnership with the US Administration for Children and Families and the US Department of Health and Human Services, has funded a collaborative national project focused on development of postsecondary education options for students with intellectual disabilities. “Think College” is a consortium led by the University of Massachusetts at Boston, and it has developed a network for existing and emerging postsecondary education programs. The purpose is to provide information to students, families, and professionals in the service and education arena about postsecondary education sites. Of equal importance is the project’s promotion of research, program development, and evaluation.

A survey indicates that there are more than 150 postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disabilities in the nation, but there has been no coordination of research, model development, and information sharing for replication.² The establishment of this consortium will bring a systematic approach to the development of postsecondary education options with an eye to quality outcomes.

“Think College” recently provided data analyses of outcomes for young adults with intellectual disabilities who had left high school. The data derived from the national vocational rehabilitation database (RSA 911) shows that participation in postsecondary education has a significant positive impact on getting a job, keeping it, and increasing earning power. Postsecondary education options for individuals with intellectual disabilities are not widely available and accessed. The survey examining outcomes for those who did not participate in postsecondary education services showed only 32% of young adults sustaining employment with average earnings at 62% of what young adults who had participated in a postsecondary education program earned.³ This national trend could be averted in North Carolina by having adequate postsecondary education options.

THE MODEL AND THE EVALUATION

Beyond Academics at UNCG is based on a typical undergraduate experience in the college setting. Entering its third year, the program serves 25 students in the freshmen, sophomore, and junior classes. The senior year of the program is now under construction. The course of study covers 10 competencies that advance in complexity with each year of enrollment. All coursework is tested and graded with expectations for a certain level of mastery to attain credit hours. Competencies are taught through inclusive classroom and Beyond Academics-dedicated classroom experiences. Core competencies include personal wellbeing, nutrition management, relationships, advocacy, household management, financial literacy, transportation, social responsibility, career development, and community inclusion and social networks.

The classroom experience makes up one-third of the equation for competency standards in each of these topical areas. The remaining two-thirds of academic time offers opportunities for students to apply their skills. The unique feature of Beyond Academics is the emphasis on an inclusive lifestyle with other students. The student housing complexes, the internship and employment sites, and the community social networks are the venues for Beyond Academics students to practice what they have learned. The focus on connections with other college students

provides a rich environment for service learning. The benefit of the connections and relationships for the Beyond Academics students and the UNCG students is reciprocal.

UNCG departmental involvement is growing. The Department of Kinesiology, through its Therapeutic Recreation Program, was the first university partner with Beyond Academics. There are numerous opportunities through this department for inclusive classes and projects undertaken in the community. More recently, the Department of Specialized Education Services, the Human Development and Family Studies Department, and the Communication Sciences and Disorders Department have emerged as partners in shared classroom and other related activities. The interest continues to grow on campus and includes opportunities for the Beyond Academics students to audit select college classes of interest. Conversely, Beyond Academics' focus on mastering independent living has captured the attention of some UNCG students who indicate the usefulness of that information in their own growth.

The North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities understood the need for a studied approach to developing postsecondary education models. Two years ago the Council awarded a research and model development grant to the Center for Youth, Family, and Community Partnerships at UNCG. The Center gathers and analyzes important data about the Beyond Academics operation, using results for model development with a goal of site replication in North Carolina. Evaluation protocol includes goal attainment scaling, anecdotal information related to student progress in class attendance, class auditing, recreational activities and volunteerism, and service learning. Other areas under review are social connectedness, adaptive functioning, student satisfaction, family satisfaction and perceptions, UNCG student outcomes, and economic cost/benefit.

Student outcomes are promising and will determine how the model develops. Students are living on their own with the majority needing fewer supports than when they started, and they are engaging in a life of social connections not previously experienced. Students are learning to manage their own financial affairs. Through their jobs, they are learning the ethic of work. They are asserting their voices in challenging real and perceived injustices that might occur because of their disability. Finally, students are assuming other meaningful roles that will help them achieve the life they imagined. They are hopeful about their futures.

TAKING UP THE CHALLENGE

Every year of operation produces more learning and improvements for the program. One could describe this experience as "the glory and the agony." The glory is the promise that young adults with intellectual disabilities will achieve a self-determined life; the agony is the narrow availability of the service throughout the state.

Systemic challenges that have to do with funding, policy, and philosophy of this kind of program will need to be addressed. The gains for students that have been made because of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) will be for naught if we do not summon the collective resources to go the next step for continued growth and learning. A system predicated on caretaking versus self-reliance will cost more than our investment in empowerment of people.

Is Beyond Academics for every young adult with an intellectual disability? No, but neither is college the preference of every young adult who graduates from high school. However, the difference for individuals with intellectual disabilities is the availability of the opportunity to attend and succeed in community college or university-based programs, if he or she chooses to do so

Beyond Academics is but one vehicle for postsecondary education and training for students with intellectual disabilities. Community college is another rich resource that has incredible promise and ready access. Just as universities and community colleges work together for countless students in North Carolina, the same needs to happen for students with intellectual disabilities. North Carolina is at the crossroads. We must commit to the direction that brings lasting results and a meaningful life to individuals with intellectual disabilities. More opportunities for lifelong learning are the conduit for these outcomes.

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