An Affordable, High-Quality University Option for Students on the Spectrum

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CUNY Project REACH

The City University of New York (CUNY), a stalwart champion for equal access to higher education, formed Project REACH (Resources and Education on Autism as CUNY’s Hallmark) in December of 2011. The Project’s goals include educating the student body, staff and faculty about students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), as well as ensuring that students on the spectrum are given a fair chance to succeed in the college arena.

We are seeing a sharp rise in students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders seeking college degrees, and campuses all across the country are struggling to keep up with the demand for support. Services for this population have been seen most often in kindergarten through 12th grade, but until recently the supports seemed to end there. Many colleges and universities lack any formal support or accommodations to help students on the spectrum perform the most difficult transition for any student: starting college. CUNY saw that it needed to expand the types of supports to serve this population of students. Project REACH was created in order to investigate, research, and put into action the best practices and what could be done to improve them. The project also solicited feedback from the CUNY student population to make sure it accurately addressed their concerns. So REACH and its family of programs are not only a direct extension of the Central Office of Student Affairs, but an arm of its student populations.

Working with a grant from the FAR Fund totaling $100,000, CUNY Project REACH was able to fund four separate CUNY campus’ endeavors to build programs for individuals on the spectrum. Additionally, each campus project was connected with CUNY LEADS (Linking Employment, Academic and Disability Services) counselors. As their name suggests, CUNY LEADS are CUNY’s in-house employment counselors for the disabilities community throughout the CUNY system. The consistent theme of the REACH projects includes peer-mentoring, counseling services and the education of campus faculty and staff. The individual programs are similar in many ways. Each program operates using a maximum annual budget of $20,000, and all services are offered free of charge to any identified student.

Students in Brooklyn College’s Collaborative Autism Spectrum Program (CASP) were offered a full range of services including tutoring, social-skills training, career-readiness training, courses on navigating communication and more. On another front, CASP created strong links with the Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism Association NY chapter, an outside support network.

Transitioning to College Support (TCS), the project formed within Kingsborough Community College (KBCC), saw a gradual rise in their identified population combined with an 80% retention rate for individuals enrolled in the program. TCS also made sure that ASD resources were made available to the entire KBCC faculty by holding webinars and hosting resources online. Their successful series of workshops have assured them future opportunities to expand and deploy these services in the future.

The College of Staten Island used their grant money to start the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI). This program is one of the most comprehensive programs for students on the spectrum in the city of New York, receiving rave reviews from professionals, parents, and students alike. BBI provides a wide range of services including academic coaching and peer mentoring. They also have a website that serves as a resource to educate the public and college community about autism spectrum disorders and a rapid screening tool to help people see if they should seek a diagnosis from a mental health professional, all from the comfort of their own home.

The Borough of Manhattan Community College started Project PASS (Progressing

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Always be our parents’ children, we will also always have mentors to go and seek

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Autism Spectrum Services) and focused heavily on curriculum redevelopment as a means to make classes more accessible to students on the spectrum. They studied various classroom components such as teaching style, syllabi, and curricula. PASS worked persistently with the Deans of the college to develop a plan for slowly bringing about changes in the classroom that would help make classes more accessible to students on the spectrum, while not changing the high academic standards of the City University of New York.

Compared to other ASD higher education programs throughout the United States, Project REACH is inspiring. When we compared our project to one of the larger and well regarded programs in our region, we found our services to be almost equal. Both programs present students with peer mentoring, social-skill workshops, and career counseling. The services offered by this program cost the student’s family $2,600 per semester, in addition to the cost of private school’s tuition.

Another program located in the South-Atlantic region charges a $4,000 per semester fee (in addition to tuition) and offers comparable services to Project REACH as well as including a large focus on civic engagement. There is a university that offers graduate-student led study sessions 5 days a week as well as many of the academic services listed above and live-in residence hall support for $6,500 a semester. Finally, for $8,000 a semester, a student could receive very similar accommodations to all previously mentioned, as well as take part in “Psycho-Educational” support groups and focused vocational support including career placement. All of these fees are in addition to the tuition for the University in question.

CUNY has 24 campuses and an estimated number of 1,000 students on the spectrum that need services and reasonable accommodations. As this article clearly states, it’s a fully functional program that provides top of the line quality services and supports is not cheap by any means. Many universities charge for their programs because they need some, if not most, of that money to fund the services and supports that they provide students. As Project REACH moves forward with assembling the best practices and putting them to work CUNY-wide, we are trying to bring our services to CUNY campuses without a financial burden tacked on to students’ families. Additionally, REACH seeks to bring understanding and support to not only faculty and staff, but students as well. In that sense, CUNY Project REACH sets itself apart from the previously mentioned universities as it is not explicitly a program of accommodations, but a program of social change. We aspire to meet the needs of every student on the spectrum who attends any of our 24 campuses and nurture the understanding in their peers that will lead to a more accommodating society. REACH has received an additional $100,000 grant awarded by the FAR Fund for the 2013-2014 academic year, and with it we will be able to “reach” out to more students on the spectrum and change even more lives for the better.

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