This edition of the CUNY Project REACH newsletter covers September 2013 – February 2014, and we have a lot of exciting information to report. Project REACH just celebrated its second anniversary! Many exciting things have happened in the past six months. Project REACH remains in the forefront of providing innovative approaches to helping students on the spectrum succeed.

The REACH family of projects has made many strides in assisting students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) since our Project’s inception. Our best practices have inspired our colleagues, and our work to better the lives of students on the spectrum is highly regarded among our peers.

After evaluating the work we have done over the past year, examining the information we have gathered from our mini-grant projects, holding meetings with outside organizations, and reviewing the information from our activities as a project, we are taking the best practices and putting them into our work over the upcoming year so that we can have an even better third year going forward.

Some of our recent activities are briefly summarized below. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you would like more information about our past, current, or future activities, or if you have something to contribute to our next newsletter. We continue to welcome your participation in Project REACH activities and programs.

1. **Mini-Grant Update:** As you may remember from our previous newsletter, Project REACH issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) which made funds available to support a Mini-Grant Program so that we could fund the best practices for students on the spectrum on our CUNY campuses.

   We have seen excellent work from each of these projects. We would like to thank everyone involved in making these projects the successes they have been. Once their impact is measured, these projects can then be shared, expanded and replicated.
CUNY Project REACH started off the 2013-2014 academic year by renewing our funding of four CUNY campus' mini-grant projects. The four campuses are: Borough of Manhattan Community College, Brooklyn College, the College of Staten Island, and Kingsborough Community College. REACH also welcomed a new campus project, LaGuardia Community College's Project ASSIST (Academic and Social Student Integration for Success Team), led by Regina Varin-Mignano. Read more about the mini-grants on our website:  http://www.cuny.edu/projectREACH

2. **Article Published:** Project REACH's staff wrote an article that was published in the Fall 2013 edition of *Autism Spectrum News*. The article, “An Affordable, High-Quality University Option for Students on the Spectrum” compared the REACH family of projects to others from all over the eastern area in categories such as services offered, fees for families, counseling programs, and post-college employment opportunities. The article demonstrated that REACH provides as good if not better supports and services than many highly regarded post-secondary programs, and REACH passes no costs along to the students on the spectrum. View the article in the Fall issue here: article appears on page 22: http://mhnews-autism.org/back_issues/ASN-Fall2013.pdf

3. **Strategic Advisory Meeting:** In February, Project REACH celebrated its two-year anniversary by holding its third annual Strategic Advisory Meeting. This meeting gathered professionals in the autism spectrum disorder (ASD) community, both from within and outside of CUNY, from all around New York to review work done, talk about plans going forward, get valuable feedback into issues important to ASD students in higher education, collaborate on issues of importance to students on the spectrum, and discuss the progress of Project REACH. Invitations were extended to key stakeholders involved with the project.

   After a short networking lunch, University Assistant Dean for Student Affairs, Christopher Rosa, provided opening greetings at the gathering and explained that the number of students with autism in higher education is rapidly increasing. Lisa Pollich, REACH’s Project Director, gave a presentation about the history of Project REACH, a review of the project’s activities over the past year, and a description of the plans for the future. The importance of student outreach, educational training for the campus community, and collaboration across disciplines was also emphasized.

   Next, the Principal Investigators of each of our five Project REACH campus mini-grant projects gave a presentation about their campus projects: the overall goals, as well as the progress/highlights their particular projects have made this year, and discussed the impact
of their projects on students with ASD. After this, attendees discussed what kinds of efforts were needed going forward to help students on the spectrum, as well as what kinds of issues and challenges campuses faced when dealing with ASD. Following that, we held breakout sessions and facilitated discussion, moderated by the principal investigators of our mini-grant projects. These addressed issues and concerns about particular aspects of ASD in college, to brainstorm the sharing of ideas.

Participants were in attendance from the following CUNY colleges: Hunter College, Brooklyn College, College of Staten Island, Borough of Manhattan Community College, Kingsborough Community College, LaGuardia Community College, Lehman College, Bronx Community College, CUNY School of Law; and the following organizations and divisions: CUNY LEADS, CUNY Coalition for Students with Disabilities (CCSD), Office of the Dean of Health and Human Services, CUNY Communications and Marketing. Non-CUNY organizations included New York State Board of Regents, Asperger Syndrome Training Employment Partnership, the FAR Fund, the Museum Access Consortium, the Summit School, Birch Family Services, JobPath, Resources for Children with Special Needs, and Greenburgh North Castle UFSD.

It was a very productive meeting in which several issues were voiced, important topics were discussed, there was collaboration across many disciplines, and Project REACH received guidance about where to focus our efforts going forward. We use the feedback from these meetings to assist us in fine-tuning our plans for the upcoming year.

The meeting reinvigorated REACH’s commitment to helping students on the spectrum get the most out of their college experience. This meeting helped to further shape the direction of the project, and we would like to thank everyone who participated. Special thanks were extended to Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, Frank Sanchez; University Dean for Health and Human Services, William Ebenstein; Deputy to the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Paulette Dalpes; for their guidance and support; and also to Shirlee Taylor of the FAR Fund for funding this initiative.

4. **Disability Awareness Month REACH Capstone Event:** Last year, we organized our first CUNY Disability Awareness Month event, “Conference REACH,” in April. The theme of that educational conference was *Autism in Higher Education*. This awareness event featured education and training for CUNY disability service professionals, administrators, public safety representatives, behavioral intervention team members, plus guests from outside of CUNY. Those in attendance were given new practices to utilize on their campuses, and are now better equipped to accommodate those on the spectrum.

We have already started planning for the 2014 CUNY Project REACH’s Disability Awareness Month Capstone Event. This year’s theme is “A Spectrum of Celebration” (a
celebration of autism identity and autism culture). Our guest speaker will be Valerie Paradiz, ASD specialist and author of Elijah’s Cup: A Family’s Journey into the Community and Culture of High Functioning Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome. The event will be held at Borough of Manhattan Community College. Details are still being finalized. Please let me know if you have suggestions.

Many individual campuses also hold autism-specific events in conjunction with Disability Awareness Month in April. We will send an announcement of Disability Awareness Month autism-related events as details become available.

5. **Presentations:** A major function of Project REACH is to provide training and education to faculty, staff, and students about ASD and the issues that students on the spectrum face. Project REACH gave several presentations during the past six months. These presentations are aimed at increasing awareness of ASD and Project REACH.

- **Employment Presentation for MAC:** Project REACH’s Director, Lisa Pollich, was invited to give a presentation as part of a panel discussion hosted by the Museum Access Consortium (MAC) on October 23, 2013, to discuss the REACH program and how it increases and supports access for employment of students on the spectrum. This event was held at the Intrepid Sea, Air, and Space Museum. The Museum Access Consortium is dedicated to improving accessibility at NY’s museums and cultural institutions. The workshop was entitled Inclusion in the Museum Workplace for Teenagers and Adults on the Autism Spectrum. The audience consisted of employers from cultural institutions from across the New York Metro area. Lisa’s presentation included a brief discussion about Project REACH, followed by an overview of various employment resources for people on the spectrum. Attendees were provided with examples of people on the autism spectrum who have gained employment and the successes they experienced. The workshop explored how cultural institutions can provide life skills, job training, and employment opportunities for teenagers and adults on the autism spectrum. Thank you to Museum Access Consortium for inviting us to present this information.

- **Transitions Presentation for Fordham:** Fordham University’s Center for Community Engaged Research invited Project REACH to present at their Autism Connect Conference on November 8, 2013. Christopher Rosa, University Assistant Dean for Student Affairs and CUNY Project REACH’s Principal Investigator, was part of a panel called Transitions to Adulthood, and he discussed the priorities for people with autism as they transition to adulthood, and how colleges and employers can support individuals on the spectrum. Kristen Gillespie, co-principal investigator of the REACH mini-grant at College
of Staten Island, was also a presenter on this panel. The event gathered experts, advocacy groups, medical and educational practitioners, researchers, and people on the spectrum to speak on issues of practices and policies, and to share their recommendations for enhancing the quality of life for adolescents and adults with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). We would like to thank Ann Higgins-D’Alessandro, Conference Organizer, for facilitating our inclusion in this event.

These presentations demonstrate the various strategies and approaches that Project REACH is using to empower students with ASD to gain access to everything that the university has to offer, both academics as well as student activities.

✓ **Webinars:** Over the past few months, following the theme of learning and growing as a project, we have decided to take our professional development initiative to the next level. Project REACH has decided to host showings of a series of educational and informative webinars directed at specific university departments in order to provide the education and information they need in order to be able to assist students on the spectrum adjust to college life. These webinars are a cost-effective way of providing targeted training to our campus community without having to incur the cost of paying an outside individual to come to CUNY. The education from these webinars provided CUNY personnel from multiple campuses important professional development about students on the spectrum.

We have hosted three webinars so far. Our first webinar, held in December, was provided by autism expert Jane Thierfeld-Brown, on the topic of *Autism in Residence Halls*. Jane Thierfeld-Brown is Co-Director of Student Services at the University of Connecticut, School of Law and a long-time researcher of Asperger’s Syndrome in higher education. We presented this webinar to CUNY’s Council of Residence Life Directors. The webinar covered a variety of topics such as safety in residence halls, choosing roommates, disclosure, and handling conflicts. It explored some of the challenges that students on the spectrum often face in residence halls and suggested ways to address them. This education gave our residence hall directors at our campuses a better foundation to assist students on the spectrum.

Our second webinar, held in January, was provided by the Rochester Regional Center for Autism Spectrum Disorder on the topic of *Transition Preparation for Students with Autism*, and was attended by staff from various CUNY colleges.
The third webinar that we hosted, held in February, covered the topic of *Information about Students with Autism/Aspergers for Student Affairs Professionals*, also provided by Jane Thierfeld-Brown, and was presented specifically to CUNY’s campus Disability Services Office personnel.

We have a fourth webinar planned for the afternoon of March 17 on the topic of *Considerations in Employment Supports for Individuals on the Autism Spectrum*. This webinar presents information on providing vocational training and employment supports for adults with ASD. Contact our office for more information.

6. **Website Update:**

- We added a new page to the CUNY website to highlight the accomplishments of our CUNY Project REACH students. Please send in your information to be added to the page! This page is called “Project REACH Student Achievers” and can be found at: [http://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/sa/services/disabilities/ASDandProjectREACH/ProjectREACHStudentAchievers.html](http://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/sa/services/disabilities/ASDandProjectREACH/ProjectREACHStudentAchievers.html).

- We added a link on the CUNY Project REACH website to list all of the autism-related courses being offered throughout CUNY. This link can be found at [http://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/sa/services/disabilities/ASDandProjectREACH/AutismClassesatCUNYFall13.pdf](http://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/sa/services/disabilities/ASDandProjectREACH/AutismClassesatCUNYFall13.pdf).

- We added a link in our Resources section to the The Global and Regional Asperger Syndrome Partnership (GRASP), which has a section on their website dedicated to preparing for and going to college. It contains online resources, an educational video for college professors, and links to websites. The link is: [http://grasp.org/page/college-bound-help](http://grasp.org/page/college-bound-help)

Be sure to visit our website [www.cuny.edu/projectREACH](http://www.cuny.edu/projectREACH) and look at what Project REACH is doing. Since the website’s launch, we have updated it with news about our Project, our newsletter, links to information about our mini-grant projects, and some basic ASD resources. This is a one-stop resource for information about Project REACH and our Mini-Grant Projects. We also have photos of Project REACH events and presentations, and some educational materials for faculty, staff, and students to learn more about students on the spectrum. We are continuing to develop our website into a comprehensive web resource. Plans for the future include adding updates of our recent activities, including more photographs, adding more resources, and a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section. Suggestions for future additions and/or comments can be sent to: lisa.pollich@mail.cuny.edu
7. **College of Staten Island Mini-Grant Article:** The College of Staten Island featured a CUNY newswire release last October about their Project REACH mini-grant program. The article, “CSI Center for Student Accessibility Works with Academic Departments on Initiative for Students on the Autism Spectrum,” described the goals of their program, their accomplishments during the first semester, their activities, and some of their plans for the future. Here is a link to the article: [http://www1.cuny.edu/mu/forum/2013/10/02/center-for-student-accessibility-works-with-academic-departments-on-initiative-for-students-on-the-autism-spectrum/](http://www1.cuny.edu/mu/forum/2013/10/02/center-for-student-accessibility-works-with-academic-departments-on-initiative-for-students-on-the-autism-spectrum/)

8. **Students Accepted into ASTEP:** Two of our Project REACH students were accepted into the ASTEP/ Corporate Lecture Series (Asperger’s Syndrome Training and Employment Partnership) program for the 2013-2014 academic year. ASTEP is an organization that creates and supports programs that promote long-term employment for individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome. The two students were selected for the Corporate Lecture Series, a competitive program in which students attend presentations from a series of fortune 1000 companies and then network with them afterwards. This program gives our students a unique opportunity to meet corporate executives, market their resumes, and possibly gain employment with the companies. We had two students participate last year and two this year. One of our students, an accounting major at a senior college, just recently landed a job at a multi-national accounting firm as a result.

9. **We’ve Moved:** Please note our new address, phone number, and fax number. CUNY Project REACH, along with the Central Office of Student Affairs, moved to our new location at the beginning of the Fall semester. Our address and fax number can be found on the letterhead on the top of page 1. Our new telephone number is 646-664-8815 (Project REACH) and 646-664-8801 (Lisa Pollich).

10. **College of Staten Island website:** Dr. Kristen Gillespie-Lynch, co-principal investigator for The College of Staten Island’s (CSI) Project REACH mini-grant, invites you to use and share the website CSI developed to serve as a resource for people on the spectrum and the broader community. The website includes information about the mentorship program for students on the spectrum at CSI, training about autism, links to autism resources, an autism screening tool, and a planning tool to help students on the spectrum achieve their goals (this tool is only visible if one makes a free account). Dr. Gillespie-Lynch would particularly like to have professionals who work with people on the spectrum do the online training. The training was effective at increasing knowledge and decreasing stigma associated with ASD at CSI last term. It is currently being used in
Lebanon, Japan, Turkey and the United States in order to evaluate its effectiveness internationally. The website is a work in progress. In order to provide much valued feedback about how to improve it, please email Kristen at: kgillyn@gmail.com. Below is the link to the website: http://www.autism-collegeeducation.com/

11. **Funding:** We are exploring obtaining additional forms of funding through foundations and grants. If we can receive more funding, we will be able to grow Project REACH even bigger so that we can expand to additional campuses and provide more services.

Below is some other information that may be of interest:

A. **Film on Asperger's Syndrome at Lehman College:**

Lehman College (Bronx) hosted the 6th Annual REELAbilities, the NY Disabilities Film Festival on March 11. Admission was free. This is the nation’s largest festival of films dedicated to promoting awareness and appreciation of the lives, stories, and artistic expressions of people with different abilities. The festival featured internationally award-winning films that portray individuals with disabilities, in ways never before seen. Following the film screening, there was be an opportunity for Q&A and discussion with the filmmakers and special guests. All of the films, from across the spectrum of disabilities, are cutting edge and capture some of the social and political challenges confronted by people with different abilities in our society.

One of the films was entitled “A Life with Aspergers,” which is an animated documentary that explores the challenges of growing up and living with Asperger’s Syndrome. Filmmaker/producer/director, Jaime Ekkens attended the festival and participated in a discussion following the screening. For info: Lehman Office of Student Disability Services: 718-960-8441 or disability.services@lehman.cuny.edu

(Thank you to Merrill Parra, Director of Student Disability Services, Lehman College)

B. **Recent Articles:**

- Using the College Infrastructure to Support Students on the Autism Spectrum, from the *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, Spring 2014. See Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, Volume 27, Issue 1, page 65-74. It can also be found as a link for AHEAD members here: https://www.ahead.org/publications/jped


(Thank you to Ilene Tannenbaum of Brooklyn College; Barbara Fischkin of CUNY Communications and Marketing; and Susan Longtin of Brooklyn College for bringing some of these to my attention.)

Please call me or send me an email if you want further details about anything in this newsletter. We welcome your feedback to help shape this project. I encourage you to submit information to me for the newsletter that you believe may be relevant. This newsletter highlights our commitment to providing our CUNY family with resources to embrace students with ASD and promote diversity.

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Project REACH is a university-wide project that is funded in part by the FAR Fund and coordinated by the Central Office Division of Student Affairs of the City University of New York (CUNY). The purpose of Project REACH is to enhance CUNY’s capacity to support its growing population of college students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD).