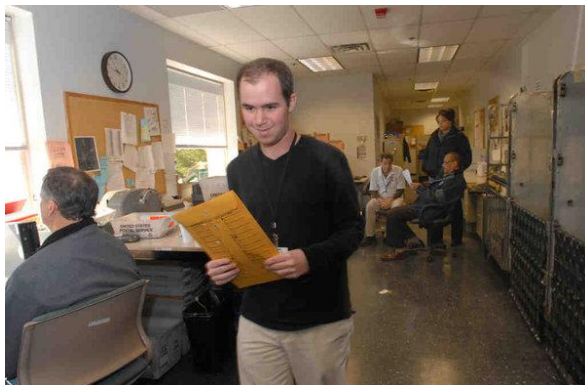


New Jersey college wants higher ed possible for those with disabilities

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The College of New Jersey, backed by a \$1.28 million federal grant, is working with state high schools to spread a hopeful message to students with intellectual disabilities: College is possible. TCNJ's Career and Community Studies (CCS) program, which offers a four-year certificate for students with a range of intellectual disabilities, including autism, Williams syndrome, and Down syndrome, has partnered with the Haddonfield and Hopewell Valley Regional School Districts to encourage such students and their families to consider a college education.

"Students with intellectual disabilities have never had that put before them," said Rebecca Daley, director of CCS. "College is something your siblings might do, but it was never an option."

TCNJ plans to invite about 100 families from across the state to an April 2 conference on higher-education options for students with intellectual disabilities, according to Richard Blumberg, a cofounder of the program.

The gathering is intended to help families and educators learn about college programs, and aid them in developing a vision and plan for kindergarten through 12th grade with postgraduation education as a goal. "I see this as a brave new frontier of special education, and I think we'll see a lot of two-year, four-year programs develop over the next few years," Blumberg said.

The CCS program, developed in 2005 with aid from the National Down Syndrome Society, supports the learning and adaptive needs of students ages 18 to 25, in part through peer mentoring, pre-teaching, and classroom learning aids. Its inaugural class of six students graduated last spring. The class size has since increased to nine. Students in the CCS program take courses as varied as marketing, health and exercise science, and women's and gender studies.

"What we're finding is that the students, when they're given support, they do well," Daley said. "Maybe not competitively well, but they're walking away from that class with the big ideas and concepts, a new understanding of the topic."

Bonni Rubin-Sugarman, director of special education for Haddonfield schools, said the prospect of students with intellectual disabilities having many of the same opportunities as other students their age is a major step forward. "If we can do this now in the same place, the same environment where typical 18- to 22-year-olds are spending their time doing this next chunk of life," she said, "that's a home run."

Though the high school partnerships are still in their early stages, and the students in Haddonfield Memorial High School's special education program who would be eligible for CCS or similar programs are relatively few in number - about four or five - Rubin-Sugarman is enthusiastic about the possibilities. As early as kindergarten and first grade, she said, Haddonfield schools are raising the possibility of college education with the families of students with intellectual disabilities.

A focus of the partnerships, Daley said, is "to be looking backward at what could be happening in high school that could better prepare students to be a college student."

Blumberg said he hoped to introduce students now in the CCS program to high school students with intellectual disabilities who may be considering college. "Kids in high school can say, 'Hey, that person's just like me,' and they can really get it," he said.

The example that CCS students offer, according to the organizers, is one of social and emotional - in addition to academic - growth. Through their explorations of social and academic life, supported by a team of about 35 student mentors, Daley said, CCS students develop the sense of independence and esteem that all college students seek.

"Students are using and learning better self-advocacy skills and self-determination skills, so at the end of their senior year, they're able to say what they want, and articulate and determine where they live instead of having someone else determine that for them," she said.

The program also helps students find jobs. Of the six students who graduated in 2010, one is working at a Wawa store and a physical therapy center, one is interning at a credit union, one recently started work at a state disabilities service office, and a fourth is employed by the college in food preparation. Besides the pay, "just having a place to go where you're valued and you like the work" is considered an important achievement, Daley said. CCS is helping the remaining two graduates look for work opportunities.

In partnering with CCS, Rubin-Sugarman said, she hopes to learn which of its strategies have been most effective as she works to make higher learning a reality for college prospects among her students. "There's a lot of hope in that," she said. "There's a future in that. There's a great deal of optimism in that."

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