

**Inaugural Conference on Post-Secondary Programs for Students with Autism
Spectrum Disorders**

Summary Report

May 22nd – May 23rd, 2012
Radisson Hotel, Harrisburg, PA

An Initiative funded by the Pennsylvania Autism Services Education, Resource, Training
(ASERT) Collaborative

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Introduction

The mission of Autism Services Education Resources and Training (ASERT) Collaborative is to enhance the lives of Pennsylvanians with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), of all ages and abilities, by improving regional access to quality services and interventions, providing information and support to families, training professionals in best practices and facilitating partnerships among providers of services throughout the Commonwealth. Funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, Bureau of Autism Services, ASERT uses information from the Pennsylvania Autism Needs Assessment to address the needs of individuals with ASD in Pennsylvania.

The Inaugural Conference on Post-Secondary Programs for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders was held in Harrisburg, PA on May 22-23, 2012 to gather post-secondary institutions across Pennsylvania that have developed or have an interest in developing transition and support programs for students with ASD. Throughout the conference, successful program implementation strategies that are aligned with the needs of students with ASD were discussed. Presenters, attendees, and two self-advocates identified the challenges and concerns of institutions, program implementers, and students with ASD transitioning into and striving to succeed in post-secondary institutions. Representatives from select Pennsylvania universities with programs specifically targeted to students with ASD (Drexel University, Eastern University, Mercyhurst University, Saint Joseph's University, and Penn State Hershey) presented on topics surrounding the formation of their respective post-secondary ASD programs.

States and systems, including postsecondary education, are struggling to identify and implement the supports that individuals with ASD need to succeed across and between settings. In fact, this struggle translates to individuals with all disabilities, as they are more likely to be underemployed than individuals without a disability (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2012). Individuals with ASD are increasingly working to prepare themselves for employment. Although about half of individuals with ASD are enrolling into post-secondary institutions to continue their educations, only four percent of institutions provide nontraditional transition support systems geared towards the specific needs of individuals with ASD (Department of Education, 2009). Ultimately, retention rates for those with ASD in post-secondary institutions are lower than the national average (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2012). The transition to a postsecondary setting may be particularly challenging for individuals with ASD for many reasons. For example, in postsecondary settings, schedules vary from day to day which may present challenges for individuals with ASD who prefer routines. To help prepare for these challenges, it is instrumental for students with ASD and their families to begin planning for life after high school at or before 14 years old.

It is essential to find a post-secondary program for students with ASD, whose model fits the needs of that individual. Key elements of any support service should be sustainable, provide transition supports, professional academic supports, professional and peer social supports, and accessible community resources (Komich-Hare, 2012). The transition into postsecondary environments may also require that individuals with ASD become vocal and engaged self-advocates. Legislation aimed at creating optimal learning environments for individuals with disabilities, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); do not apply after secondary education and other legislation such

as Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) limit parent's access to the student academic records (Komich-Hare, 2012).

Below is an outline of select post-secondary programs that focus on supporting individuals with ASD in Pennsylvania. Along with descriptions of each program, table 1 shows the successes, challenges, and similarities across the programs. In addition to the post-secondary programs, Dr. Michael Murphy from Penn State Hershey presented on social skills training for individuals with ASD.

Presenters:

Douglas Cornman, MA- Eastern University
Katherine Croce, MEd- Saint Joseph's University
Carolyn Hare, MS-Keynote, AHEADD
Felicia Hurewitz, PhD- Drexel University
Brad McGarry, MA- Meryhurst University
Michael J. Murray, MD- Penn State Hershey
Emily Porter- Self-Advocate and Student
Scott Robertson – Self-Advocate and Student

Drexel Autism Support Program (DASP Initiative)

- Goal - Improve outcomes of Drexel students living with ASD in college as well as provide post-college employment assistance.
- No application process.
- The project developed two sets of training:
 1. Self-advocacy and social skills training (SASS) involves two-hour seminars based on the student's choice of topic, for example dating advice and social skills.
 2. Each applicant of DASP is paired with a peer mentor who is trained to track progress, help set goals, and assist the student with college life.
- The program does not provide special housing accommodations for those students participating in DASP.
- DASP is a student run program free to students with ASD.

Eastern University's College Success Program (CSP) for Students Living with ASD

- Mission – To provide targeted support, cultural awareness, and practical knowledge to students living with ASD, so that they may have equal access to an undergraduate college experience and actively participate in university life.
- Student supports focus on academic success, social development, adaptive functioning, and cultural understanding and include early arrival orientation, peer and graduate student mentors, student goal statements, weekly group meetings and individual counseling, and liaison support with faculty and university departments.
- CSP assesses the student's adaptive and executive function, sensory processing and anxiety prior to and during student's tenure at the university.

- Training and ongoing consultation is provided to faculty, Residence Life staff, and university departments such as campus security, health services, and disability services.
- CSP supports full-time, residential undergraduate students living with a documented ASD diagnosis.
- The program opens fall 2012
- Fee - \$6,500 per semester.

Saint Joseph's University Asperger Support through Peers in Reaching Education (ASPIRE)

- The Kinney Center for Autism Education and Support was created to provide multi-disciplinary education and research opportunities for those who seek to improve and extend opportunities, outcomes, and the quality of life for people living with ASD.
- The ASPIRE program provides support for students with ASD enrolled in Saint Joseph's University by incorporating social, organizational, and daily living skills into support systems.
- ASPIRE allows students to move onto campus early to allow them to acclimate to college life.
- Students are assigned to a case manager for weekly meetings.
- Entities on campus such as the counseling center, dining services, disabilities office, and educational support work collaboratively to provide students with support they need.
- All Resident Advisors/Assistants (RA's) are trained in ASD support.
- The program will launch in the fall of 2012.
- Students are provided housing within close proximity to the Kinney Center.
- Fee - \$3,000 per year.

Asperger Initiative at Mercyhurst (AIM)

- Focuses on four elements to assist their students with ASD to succeed in a college setting: social engagement, independence, peer relation, and emotion.
- The targeted elements are incorporated into AIM's mission by providing Mercyhurst students with ASD with weekly meetings and peer mentors which are all designed to help the student ease into college life.
- The students enrolled in AIM are provided with priority registration for classes to enable students to choose professors and class times that work best for their schedule. AIM Fee - \$4,500 per year
- Another program within AIM at Mercyhurst is the Foundations Program, which allows college bound students with ASD to assess college life by living on the campus and attending college seminars for three weeks.
- The AIM students are provided with specialized housing.
- Foundations Program Fee - \$3,600 per summer.

	Successes for Post-Secondary Programs for Students with ASD	Challenges for Post-Secondary Programs for Students with ASD
Institutional	Programs geared towards helping those students with ASD raises awareness on their campus.	It can be challenging to convince university, program, department and college buy- in when introducing or launching ASD support programs. Knowledge of effective academic, social, and communicative supports for students with ASD on community campuses is lacking in many post- secondary institutions.
Program	Peer mentor programs are thought to have been the most successful element in post-secondary programs supporting students with ASD. The post –secondary programs have provided many students living with ASD with the skills, both academic and social, that they need to not only succeed at the college level but at the employment level and as a community member.	Peer mentor programs are thought to have been the most successful element in post-secondary programs supporting students with ASD. The post –secondary programs have provided many students living with ASD with the skills, both academic and social, that they need to not only succeed at the college level but at the employment level and as a community member
Student Needs	Students who are enrolled in the support programs have found it helpful while transitioning into college life.	It is important to encourage students with ASD to become self-advocates since high school independent education plans (IEP) often support students throughout their elementary and secondary careers. Every student is unique and may require different needs assessments within the program. Students and their families may find it difficult to find a post-secondary program that fits the student’s individual needs.
Similarities between Post-Secondary Programs for Students with ASD		
Academic	Every mission amongst these institutions is to improve the quality of life and support college students living with ASD during and post -college. There is not a special curriculum of classes for the students. Students must first be accepted into institution before enrolling into the ASD support programs. Each program provides students with graduate level assistance.	
Socialization	Every post-secondary program uses peer mentors to assist students with ASD. The students enrolled in these programs meet with their peer mentor weekly.	
Campus Activities	Every post-secondary program uses peer mentors to assist students with ASD. The students enrolled in these programs meet with their peer mentor weekly.	

Table 1

Lessons from Self-Advocacy Students

Along with presentations from post-secondary institutions, two students presented on self-advocacy and shared their own experiences of going to a post-secondary institution while living with ASD. Below are lessons learned and valuable perspectives from two self-advocacy students.

- Peer mentors, in depth staff training, resource centers, and small group settings are the most useful essentials in a post-secondary ASD specific program.
- Regular meetings with peer mentors encouraged social networking with others and networking with other support services on campus.
- Peer mentors as well as other supportive staff should assess their needs not necessarily ask what they need since the students may not be sure themselves.
- It is crucial to pay attention to the process of their success not just the outcome. For example, is the student staying awake all night and not eating properly to receive a good grade on a test? Just because there is a good outcome, does not mean it is a good process to achieve that outcome.
- Traditional models of services for students with ASD are helpful but do not always extend to all student needs. Learning to become self-advocates is crucial in these settings.

Conclusion

The ASERT Collaborative hopes that such networking results in more programs and supports for students with ASD offered on more college campuses. The programs should move forward to further develop internships, as well as work with local businesses to develop relationships and employment opportunities. Furthermore, post-secondary institutions should increase access to traditional and non-traditional accommodations for their enrolled students (ASERT, 2012). Traditional accommodations enable students to enter post-secondary institutions the same way other students do. This includes taking the SAT's and going through the normal college admission process as well as having access to tutoring services, priority class registration, and classroom scribes (Komich-Hare, 2012). Non-traditional programs would allow students living with ASD to take a limited amount of courses, learn self-advocacy and social skills training, and utilize an established network of support.

Future Implications

The Inaugural Conference on Post-Secondary Programs for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders provided an initial network for institutions that have either developed or in the beginning stages of implementing a post-secondary program for students living with ASD. The overall themes across all of the institutions indicated the mission to improve the quality of life for those individuals with ASD. While the presentations highlighted successes of post-secondary programs such as peer mentors and giving students enrolled in the program the skills they need to be successful post-college, the conference also highlighted the challenges to developing these programs. Funding for post-secondary programs for students with ASD and staff training and capacity are

obstacles for most institutions wanting to launch these programs. The conference only proved the importance and the necessity of statewide initiatives to further develop post-secondary programs for students with ASD.

For next steps, the ASERT will continue to compile information from the post-secondary institutions and plan to add resources from the conference to the ASERT website in an effort to promote further collaboration and progress among the conference participants. This webpage, which will be accessible through the ASERT website, will include the refined videos of the presentations, the PowerPoint presentations from the presenters, and contact information.

References:

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