



Thursday, February 19, 2009

## College Is Possible for Students With Intellectual Disabilities

### New support programs and federal funds can help students with intellectual disabilities

By *Jessica Calefati*

Posted February 13, 2009

Unlike students who pull all-nighters and cram before exams, Mount Aloysius College student Katie Apostolides has been working diligently in preparation for midterms since her first day of class. She starts papers and projects the day they are assigned, meets weekly with a different peer tutor for each of her classes, and knows to take short breaks throughout her studying in an effort to stay focused and on task. These and other strategies help Apostolides learn at a collegiate level in spite of her Down syndrome, an intellectual disability.

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If Apostolides passes her classes this semester, she will receive her associate's degree. But Apostolides's success in college is the exception rather than the rule for students with Down syndrome and other intellectual disabilities. According to preliminary results of an ongoing Department of Education study, fewer than one quarter of students with intellectual disabilities have participated in some type of postsecondary education. None has completed a degree. There is hope, however, that this will change. New initiatives started late last year will, for the first time, identify, fund, and disseminate information about programs nationwide that help intellectually disabled students gain access to college.

To date, leaders in the field know of about 150 programs, which vary significantly in rigor and structure. The [ThinkCollege.net](#) website provides basic information about each known program, but because of provisions in the Higher Education Opportunity Act (which was reauthorized by

Congress last summer) and two multimillion-dollar federal grants awarded in December 2008, the number of known programs, the number of high-quality inclusive programs, and the depth of knowledge about both is set to expand dramatically. Not only does the HEOA allow students with intellectual disabilities to qualify for Pell Grants, Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, and the Federal Work Study Program for the first time, it also establishes a new grant program that will fund the development of programs tailored specifically to college students with intellectual disabilities across the country.

When Apostolides was a child, her mother, Paulette, dreamed—but never expected—that her daughter would receive postsecondary education. In retrospect, Paulette attributes her daughter's achievements in part to the inclusive education Katie received in her Pittsburgh-area elementary, middle, and high schools. Instead of being sequestered in a special education class with other disabled students, Apostolides learned in the same classroom as her peers. She received extra help both in and outside of class when regular classroom instruction fell short of her needs. This inclusive education model continued for Apostolides when she enrolled first at Massachusetts's Becker College and then at central Pennsylvania's Mount Aloysius.

"Katie is a very different young woman now than she was in high school, a woman who has learned skills beyond academics," Paulette Apostolides says. "I've met a surprising number of college students at Becker and at Mount Aloysius who have thanked me for the opportunity to get to know Katie. She has awakened them to the capabilities of students with intellectual disabilities and has even encouraged some 'normal' students to work harder and do better, too."

Stephanie Smith Lee, the senior policy adviser for the National Down Syndrome Society, also sees inclusion as a vital piece of the education that students with intellectual disabilities should receive at all levels, especially the postsecondary level. Inclusion helps young adults with intellectual disabilities expand their independence, their ability to earn competitive wages, and their ability to be part of a community, Lee says, adding that these are the same skills any college student gains by attending an institution of higher education. Whether students audit one class a semester, challenge themselves to take a few courses for credit, or spend an entire semester simply learning how to take public transportation to and from campus independently, Lee says the benefits of these

experiences are evident. Recent research shows intellectually disabled students who completed any type of postsecondary education program earned 1.7 times more money per week than their intellectually disabled peers who received no postsecondary education.

Lee's daughter also has Down syndrome, and, like Apostolides, she expressed interest in attending a "regular college, just like the one her older brother (who is not disabled) attended," Lee says. But 10 years ago, when her daughter would have been enrolling, no programs existed in the Washington metro area that would support students with intellectual disabilities interested in an inclusive college experience, so Lee helped create such a program at George Mason University. Her daughter attended George Mason through this program for four years, and the program is now nationally recognized as one of the country's best.

"I can't stress how exciting it is to see so many doors open, to see so many opportunities for young people with intellectual disabilities to be as independent as possible, and to see so many of these young people become part of a college campus like everyone else," Lee says.

To help colleges and universities develop programs based on best practices, the University of Massachusetts Boston's Institute for Community Inclusion will use nearly \$5 million from two federal grants to help create the first national center and the first research consortium for the postsecondary education of students with intellectual disabilities. Though the Higher Education Opportunity Act's grant money cannot be distributed until Congress appropriates its funds in March, ICI researcher Debra Hart says her organization's work is already underway.

"In just the last week, we found 54 new programs, and we expect to discover about two to three times that many more programs we have not heard of already," says Hart, a woman who others in this field have dubbed a guru of postsecondary education for students with intellectual disabilities. Hart began her research 10 years ago when she received a grant to determine how these students could participate in college. Since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act provides federal funding for intellectually disabled students to attend elementary, middle, and high school with ordinary students, why could there not also be a way to help these students experience college? Hart says she asked herself back then. "Everyone deserves to go to college," she says, "students with intellectual disabilities

included."

One model program whose work Hart and others applaud is the Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Program at Massachusetts Bay Community College. As Program Coordinator Molly Boyle likes to say, students enrolled in her program hardly recognize that they are enrolled in anything more than community college classes. Program participants' education is completely inclusive, and the support they receive from the program is provided on an individualized basis, Boyle says. She added that most of the ICE program's students come to "MassBay" two to three days per week and take one to two classes per semester that they choose based on personal or vocational interests.

Because IDEA funds disabled students' education through age 21 or 22, depending on their state of residence, Boyle's main job is to coordinate the program's partnership with the public schools where prospective students are enrolled. Without programs like ICE, intellectually disabled students often continue attending high school, where they take life skills classes or are given jobs most frequently in the food service or landscaping industries until they age out of the federally funded program. Considering these outcomes, Boyle says the benefits of a student auditing even a single college class is huge. "These students have been closely monitored and supported their entire lives," Boyle says. "Programs like ICE help them gain independence, and for so many of our students, this is their first, well-deserved taste."

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