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DEARBORN

**Colleges meet special needs**

**Conference urges more possibilities**

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BY LORI HIGGINS

FREE PRESS EDUCATION WRITER

Rachael Kollman is proof that having an intellectual disability doesn't mean you have to write off a college experience. She's taking classes five days a week at Oakland University, volunteers regularly and enjoys meeting new people.

"I've changed my future," said Kollman, 24, of West Bloomfield.

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Her experience is the kind that organizers of a statewide conference held Monday in Dearborn want to see more of for students with significant learning, cognitive and other disabilities.

Oakland University in Auburn Hills is one of several higher education institutions in Michigan that have created programs that allow such students to take college courses, though in some cases they don't receive credit for the classes. Similar programs exist at Calvin College, Hope College and the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

The students take classes on campus, with extra support and often with peer mentors. There are more than 120 postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disabilities across 28 states, according to [www.thinkcollege.net](http://www.thinkcollege.net).

"There's a great demand for this kind of idea," said Barbara LeRoy, director of the Developmental Disabilities Institute at Wayne State University.

Too often, the conference's speakers said, the message is that college is out of reach. The push for programs is not about creating something special or heartwarming, said Stephan Hamlin-Smith, executive director of the Association on Higher Education and Disability, an advocacy group based in North Carolina.

"This is looking at equality of opportunity for everybody," he said. "What we're talking about is a shift in how we think about postsecondary education and how open our minds are."

Minds are clearly opening nationwide. Margaret Spellings, U.S. secretary of education, announced last month that the federal education department would spend \$1.5 million to create a center that would help colleges and universities develop and expand programs for students with intellectual disabilities.

She said K-12 schools have made strong progress in meeting the needs of these students and that "the next frontier is college."

Mike Flanagan, Michigan's superintendent of schools, told the audience the problem is that many don't buy into the notion that all children can learn. And although many of the speakers cautioned that not all students would benefit from programs like the one at OU, they said it's important to change the perception that no child with an intellectual disability would thrive. If we can change those beliefs, Flanagan said, "we're going to have a heck of a state. We're going to have a heck of a country."

About 275 people -- parents, students, secondary and postsecondary educators -- attended the conference Monday. Janice Fialka, the conference coordinator, said last week that nearly 100 had to be turned away.

They heard from Meg Grigal, principal investigator and project director of the Postsecondary Education Research Center in Maryland. She's evaluating programs in Maryland and Connecticut, and advised anyone interested in creating a program to make research a key part of the process.

They also heard from other students who've taken advantage of the programs. Tim Luciani of Lincoln Park is enrolled in a program that is a partnership between U-M-Dearborn and Wyandotte Public Schools. He was shy about taking classes on a college campus.

"It took me a while to get used to it," he said.

He described his college classes, his volunteer work of teaching young children to read, and his job at the campus bookstore. He said students like him shouldn't be afraid to give college a try.

"If you're afraid you won't want to come here," Luciani said.


Lindsay Perras, 21, of Grand Rapids, who takes classes at Calvin College, described leaving high school and being ready for a college experience.

"I am doing things that everyone else my age does," she said.

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