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A Job Well Done

The Learning Academy at USF Gives Young Adults With Autism a Path to Employment and Heightened Self-Esteem in Fields of Their Dreams

By *Dave Scheiber, USF Foundation*



The 2016 Learning Academy class, staff and mentors (left); teacher Megan Fitzpatrick in action (below).



Megan Fitzpatrick stands at the front of a crowded classroom, ready to see just how well her students at USF's College of Behavioral and Community Sciences have absorbed the week's lesson plan.

She tosses out a series of true-false questions and each one is met with enthusiastic responses from the group. In one sense, it is just a typical morning at the bustling college that focuses on such fields as mental health, social work and criminology. But in another, this is teaching with the highest of stakes in life – and with the chance for fulfilling careers hanging in the balance.

“You have a right to stick up for yourself and others,” states Fitzpatrick. “Who thinks this is true? Let's take a vote.”

Raised hands fly up around the room.

“If you know you're going to hurt somebody's feelings but you say it anyway, is that being assertive?” she asks.

A resounding chorus of “no's” fill the air.

“Crossing your arms and glaring at each other indicates you are being assertive,” the teacher remarks in a matter of fact tone.

The class laughs at that one, calling out “No way!” while one student interjects, “That’s being aggressive.”

Then come a series of life situations the students have discussed among themselves, such as what a proper assertive response would be if a co-worker borrows money and never pays it back.

“Well, we talked about how you might feel angry and lash out, but that would be wrong,” volunteers a young man. “So instead, we thought we should say, ‘Hey, excuse me, but you’re abusing the situation. That’s just not right, man.’”

Fitzpatrick is pleased. Another day at the Learning Academy – a sister program to USF’s Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) – is coming to a close. The innovative initiative was created with an Autism Speaks grant in 2007 by CARD executive director Dr. Karen Berkman and CARD consultant Susan Richmond. Their unique undertaking assists young adults diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder in finding employment in the pivotal transitional period after high school. It teaches personal skills, self-discovery and self-reliance to increase their chances of lasting success in the job market.

“Susan and I saw that there was a big gap between those teens graduating from high school and their next step in life,” says Berkman, who also serves as Learning Academy director. “Many young adults diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder are sitting at home after high school doing nothing, sitting up all night at the computer, sleeping all day, not being as productive as they could be. They end up feeling disconnected and lonely and their families feel frustrated and don’t know where to turn. When you become an adult with autism, there’s not a lot of support out there so there’s a danger of dropping off the map.”

That motivated Berkman and Richmond to revise that map with a new road sign – one that helps individuals with autism navigate the obstacles in life with success they had never imagined.



Susan Richmond and Karen Berkman

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The result is a thriving program that gives students the esteem-building experience of an on-campus university experience. But even more important, it prepares them for occupations in their areas of interest – not some dead-end position they were steered to by a job placement center ill-equipped to understand their special needs.

As evidence of its impact, the program enjoys a success rate of more than 60 percent in helping individuals with autism meet their benchmarks for placement in their career choices, compared to the Florida average of 28 percent and has helped another 20 percent move on to college or trade school toward their employment goal.

“I have witnessed firsthand the immensely positive impact that the Learning Academy has had on the lives of young people and their families,” says College of Behavioral and Community Sciences Dean Julianne Serovich. “I’m very proud of the work being done. It’s a first-rate program achieving remarkable results.”



The Learning Academy consists of two semesters of focused behavioral and life-skill training for 15 students – ages 18-25 – who have graduated from high school and have a diagnosis of autism. The condition is a developmental disability that often appears in the first three years of a child’s life. It affects areas of reasoning, social interaction and both verbal and non-verbal communication skills, and can cause difficulty in relating with others.

Berkman has devoted some 30 years of her career to working in the field of developmental disabilities. A native of New York, she earned a master's degree in psychological counseling at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, and her master's in social work and doctoral degree in special education from Syracuse University.

It was there she met two giants in the field of intellectual and de-

velopmental disabilities, Dr. Steven Taylor and Dr. Robert Bogden, professors who were passionate advocates for the rights of individuals with disabilities to enjoy community living, public transportation, a good education and employment opportunities. “I feel very fortunate to have been brought up in their value system,” Berkman says, “because it really guided my work for the last three decades, especially in creating a culture here at CARD and the Learning Academy based on those values.”

After 14 years working in Syracuse’s state system, she went on to become director of the Center for Autism at Pressley Ridge, a nonprofit agency in Pittsburgh that supports children and families facing challenging situations. While there, a colleague told her that the University of South Florida was searching for a director of its CARD program. Berkman was happy in Pittsburgh but intrigued by the opening, so she applied. One of those who interviewed her was Dr. Glen Dunlap, a longtime USF faculty member who had founded the CARD program 12 years earlier – and a name Berkman knew well.

“I first read his published literature in the late 1970s – and now here he was interviewing me,” she recalls. “That was very exciting, and a big factor in my decision.”

Berkman was offered the job and has served as USF’s CARD executive director since 2004. She and her staff have devoted countless hours and resources to helping children and young adults living with the neurological disorder, which affects in varying degrees one in 68 people. And since founding the Learning Academy nearly a decade ago, they have made career development and customizing employment opportunities a top priority. The Academy curriculum is specifically designed to create sustainable and rewarding employment, while overcoming misconceptions in the community about autism and perceived limitations of those with the disorder.



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“There’s an entire set of myths associated with individuals with autism that we all learn about in school,” says Berkman, sitting at her desk amid stacks of files and reports. “But when you see these kids in the environment we’ve created here, you can grasp the true nature of someone diagnosed with autism.



USF student mentor Aislinn Jolicoeur meets with TLA student Jade to apply learned skills.

“They are like anyone else, full of potential and with their own interests and skills. Everyone here is a student first – a USF student. When they come into this program, we treat them as responsible young adults. And one day they are going to be an employee, so our focus is on, ‘Here are the things you need to understand and learn about getting along with people in the class – and applying it to the campus, and your lives at home as well.’”

As part of the 30-week program, USF students are hired as peer mentors, providing guidance and a strong sense of connection to the university community for The Learning Academy enrollees. The program exists as a complement to CARD, a free community-based initiative funded by the Florida Department of Education through an annual grant. The Learning Academy, on the other

hand, relies on a combination of funding from Florida's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, a special TLA "success fund" it created last year for families who can't afford the \$7,500 tuition, private pay and donor contributions.

One philanthropic contribution has come from the Tampa-based Academic Excellence Foundation, in the form of funding to cover two student tuitions. "The program opens the door to a better future for the participants," says executive director Robert Dietz. "And it does that by giving these students skills they can take with them when they graduate, allowing them to obtain employment in the future – and help them throughout the rest of their lives. It's a great program that operates on a basic principle: You don't want to just give a person a fish; you want to teach that individual *how* to fish."

As a sign of its growing success, the program just had its biggest batch of applications for its current class. "I think we are a unique, high quality program, so the good news spreads around about this one," Richmond says. "Parents talk to one another. The big thing is that we tell the students, 'We take this seriously, and we want you to do that, too.' If they're doing something right, we let them know and if they do something inappropriate, we let them know, and so do the mentors. The point of all this is that they learn to fit in with their same age peers at USF."

The outcomes speak for themselves – starting with how the students learn to communicate more effectively, and how they feel about themselves overall.

"The Learning Academy is truly transformational," Berkman says. "Every year, we kept seeing this major change in the lives of our students and their families. We couldn't really put our finger on what was making that happen. But the difference from the day these kids arrived and when they graduated was huge – in terms of their confidence in what they can achieve. We hear from parents that they are amazed, because their kids are suddenly saying, 'I can handle it myself.'"



Dr. Karen Berkman

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Jacob, an 18-year-old program participant, graduated from high school last year in Southwest Florida. This is his very first time away from home, but his mother helped get him set up in his own apartment. He loves feeling independent and coming and going for classes Monday through Thursday and studying in between. On a recent afternoon, he walks across campus toward the Marshall Student Center, blending in with the flow of other backpack-toting teens and young adults walking to and from class.

"I'm going there from 1 to 3 for my mentoring," Jacob says. "I like Marshall. I spend a ton of time there. After I'm done there, I'm going to record the first video for my YouTube channel. I like to give my opinions on things – my views about the world."

Jacob is typical of the Learning Academy students – proud to be part of the greater campus community, and excited about the possibilities that lie ahead. "They feel a great sense of accomplishment that they're here in college," Fitzpatrick says. "We view them as successful, and we want them to view themselves that way, too."

Some graduates of the program go on to actually enroll at USF or other institutions near them. Some find jobs they have both liked and held onto. The big reason for that is a fundamental change four years ago in how Berkman's program sought employment opportunities for its students.

In essence, the Learning Academy expanded to become its own job placement center – circumventing a system that frequently worked against graduates and resulted in frustration.

"When we referred our students back to



TLA student Jamie shares a laugh with USF student mentor Evan Wallster.

the state's Vocational Rehabilitation office, with good action plans and ideas, the kids would end up going to employment agencies that were not even considering what they learned from the 30 weeks in our program," Richmond explains. "They'd tell the students they could work at this odd job or that one, and it frequently went nowhere."

In other instances, the students would take an assessment administered by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) office, and fail miserably. "The problem was that the test had no correlation to information that could predict success for this population, so many were considered unemployable," Berkman says. "But we said to the VR office, we'd like to work with that person anyway. Let us help them come here and we'll help them find a job. And that's how we came to be our own vendor for employment services."

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To make that happen, Berkman and Richmond formed the Learning Academy Employment Services, hired a job developer and a job coach, whose role is to help job seekers with whatever they need to be successful.

The academy's employment specialists do their own outreach to potential employers and know how to highlight the strengths and potential of their applicants. And they target companies where those applicants stand a reasonable chance to find a foothold. With a steady stream of positive results, the program began building up trust with the VR office as an effective job vendor. The relationship is an important one from a financial perspective as well. VR funds help support the Learning Academy and its Employment Services undertaking, allowing the program to keep its tuition affordable for families desperate to help their children with autism transition to the next step in life.

"It's not just about giving these kids a chance to wander around campus and a taste of the university environment," Berkman adds. "We have an intent and purpose to everything we do here. And we make sure that people always understand the connection to how this will relate to a job."

Berkman brought in a group from the University of Massachusetts last year to assess the operation top to bottom. Dozens of interviews were conducted and processes observed. The report provided a detailed confirmation of the program's life-altering impact and gave Berkman a valuable framework in her department's goal of replicating the Learning Academy elsewhere. In addition, in 2014, the program was selected by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation to showcase its work to Commissioner Janet LeBreck of the Rehabilitation Services Administration, a division of the U.S. Department of Education.



The Learning Academy staff meets with RSA commissioner Janet LeBreck (front center) in 2014 and John Howell, regional director for VR services in Southwest Florida.

Along the way, there have been many success stories, but the staff likes to talk about a former student named Alex. He loved trains – pictures of them, riding on them, everything about them. His parents had learned of a railroad school in Texas and sent their son there, but it went badly and Alex returned home dejected. But while attending the Learning Academy, a new opportunity arose. The program's job developer learned of a train museum in nearby Parish and arranged an internship.

"Alex was living in an apartment at USF and he stuck with it," Richmond recalls. "He was around a group of retired train men who had the same passion as he did, and he learned all aspects of the train world."

After graduating, Alex turned to the academy for help in finding a job in the field, but it was difficult. No jobs were materializing that matched his dream. He moved back home but continued to do work at the museum, which eventually hired him on in a more fulltime capacity. That alone would have been a happy ending for everyone involved.

“But one day, I got a call from Alex’s father – and I thought something must be wrong,” Richmond recollects. “It turned out that Alex, on his own, had applied for a job working on Ringling’s circus train. I was like, ‘What is that?’ His father explained that there’s an east coast and a west coast train, and Ringling people working on the circus ride it from city to city.”

Alex had been hired to work on the trains, doing whatever tasks they need, and left earlier this year for his new adventure – living the life of a young, independent trainman. He doesn’t have to pay for an apartment because he spends so much time traveling with Ringling. He gets benefits. And he has a sustainable job.

“His father was just elated,” Berkman says. “He said, ‘You always worry about your kid, and that’s what had gone wrong in Texas – he didn’t have any support.’ This was just like a dream come true for everyone.”

Moments like those let the staff of the Learning Academy know they are on the right track. So does a scene Berkman observed a few weeks ago while riding a bus on campus.

“I saw this group of our students, and they were yakking it up in the back and having a great time,” she says. “There they were, just a bunch of students. And that’s such an important goal: that they look so much and act so much like everybody else that they’re indistinguishable from other USF students.”

With the same chance to enjoy life on campus, learn in class – and pursue careers of their dreams.



For information about the Learning Academy or how to donate, contact CBCS Assistant Director of Development Lisa Isenbeck at (813) 974-2327 or lisenbeck@usf.edu. You can also visit <http://learningacademy.fmhi.usf.edu> to learn more about the program, read student success stories and find out more about how to support the academy.

