

Think Your Aspie Teen Can't Handle UC? Think Again...

Jan Johnston-Tyler, MA

As the parent of a spectrum teenager look toward college, I know how daunting this time is – and as a counselor to many older spectrum kids who have started college only to drop out, I know how important it is to find the right school – the first time.

Conventional wisdom would tell us that most of our Aspies will not be great matches for the University of California system of schools – by and large, these schools are big and bureaucratic and can be extremely competitive even once a student is accepted. Even the most high-functioning Aspie needs a safe and accepting place to land from time to time, which would generally disqualify the UC system as a viable option.

However, I had my opinion altered after speaking with Dr. Jan Serrantino, who runs the Disability Resource Center at UC Irvine. I spent about an hour talking to Dr. Serrantino about a specialized program she has developed for Asperger's Syndrome and other Spectrum students about four years ago and is now running at Irvine.

As a teacher, special needs advocate, and educational consultant in private practice, Dr. Serrantino foresaw the current wave of neurodiverse students entering college years ago. More recently as the director of disability services at UC Irvine, she took the necessary steps to build appropriate scaffolding to support this population. In many ways, creating this program was self-preservation – she quickly saw that the neurodiverse students at Irvine were taking the “lionshare of the resources” the disability center had to provide.

Serrantino's approach is very straightforward – create a support structure for Aspies that facilitates both academic integration and social interaction. The usual disability services help with the academic integration – working with professors, securing accommodations, getting tutoring help. The social aspects required a different type of intervention – and so, Dr. Serrantino created both student Social Plans with goals and follow up, and The Social Club – a campus organization that anyone can join, but is quietly aimed at neurodiverse students.

The club has two types of activities: social skills instruction and social activities. Both activities are run by three staff members in conjunction with five to seven neurotypical peer mentors. “These [Aspies] typically haven't spent a lot of time with NT (neurotypical) kids” and because the real world at UC and beyond is made

up of both NTs and neurodiverse people, Serrantino feels that in order to be successful, Aspies need to socialize both with NTs and other Aspies. This is where the peer mentors come in: “the key to success is training peers on supportive correction,” Serrantino says, so that they can train their Aspie charges with sensitivity while building real relationships.

Although the social plan itself is created and monitored by the DRC staff with the student, peer mentors help to carry out the plan by going to school sports, functions and clubs together, going out for pizza with a group, or just hanging out – all the while working with their Aspie friends to engender prosocial behavior. The idea is to “minimize isolation and increase socialization.”

One final component that Dr. Serrantino feels is critical to success is “near constant” contact with parents, especially at the beginning of the process. When enrolling with the DRC, staff asks the student to sign a waiver of confidentiality so that parents can be contacted, and “ninety-nine percent of the time, the student complies.” This allows the parents to be part of the social plan – even if they are hundreds of miles away.

Irvine’s program not only creates a safety net for Spectrum teens, but also continues the vital social instruction they need to be successful in – and beyond – college, which is far more than many private schools in California are currently doing.

Since starting this program, Dr. Serrantino has been spending a great deal of her time instructing other colleges and universities – in and out of the UC system – on how to build this type of program. Currently, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, and San Diego campuses have programs similar to Irvine’s, thanks to the tutelage and advocacy of Dr. Serrantino. Other UC campuses, including Berkeley, will likely have similar programs as well in the future. For more information about a specific school’s program, contact the disability resource center at that campus. For information on how to set up a program such as UC Irvine’s, contact Dr. Jan Serrantino at jserrant@uci.edu.

©2008 Jan Johnston-Tyler, MA