



## WHAT'S NEXT?

# Life After High School for Our Special Education Population

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By Pat Fontana

As juniors and seniors, high school students are thinking about their future in terms of whether they will attend college, which college they will attend, or whether they will pursue work opportunities immediately after graduating. Special education students are thinking about those same exciting adventures, with aspirations of what will become their next step after graduating. A number of high school and higher education programs throughout New York offer robust academic and life skills programs to help special education students make that transition successfully and to help them make their own dreams a reality.

Basic accommodations are required, of course, at all educational institutions. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), special education students are afforded the opportunity to take extra time with tests if they need it or to complete those tests and other assignments in certain environments that accommodate their particular needs.

However, there are many exciting and supportive programs that go well beyond those basic requirements, preparing special education students for work opportunities, encouraging them to get involved in their community, helping them to learn self-sufficiency skills, and exploring options for furthering their education. The emphasis across the board is on what the student wants to do, as questions about the student's goals and desires prevail among the programs designed to help them achieve those goals.

#### BOCES LEADS THE WAY

In Ulster and Orange counties, the BOCES Division of Special Education includes a transition planning area in which multiple professionals work "to remove barriers and create as many opportunities as possible," according to Transition Coordinator Sara Puccio. In fact, the transition process actually begins at age 12 for the students. By the time they are in high school, at age 15, the focus is on preparing them for the workplace or for college.

Kerri B. Stroka, director of special education for Orange-Ulster BOCES, says their previous school-to-work program offerings were relatively narrow. However, they have been "cultivating the program intensely over the past four years," since the birth of Including Communities. Now they have a better opportunity, through business partnerships developed over the years, "for students to have on-site and off-site work experiences aligned to their interests."

Including Communities is a program for 18- to 21-year-old students who have fulfilled their academic requirements for high school and who need to learn transition skills. They tend to work and get involved in the community of Goshen, learning how

the public transportation system works and becoming valuable members of the workforce there. Puccio emphasizes that her work with these students is "beyond rewarding" as she relates that "in special education, we tend to be focused on what students can't do—when they get to this point, it's very focused on their strengths and what they can do."

The Goshen community has more than welcomed these students. While the transition team initially thought the students would have much to learn from the business people in the community, it turns out that the employers are learning quite a bit themselves. Including Communities has grown from an initial class of 12 located in a storefront classroom to today's group of 100 students going to work sites hosted by what Stroka describes as "multiple, multiple, multiple partners" in Goshen and beyond.

Students learn employability skills as interns in local stores, bike shops, restaurants, and even the local board of elections. One of the biggest champions is LEGOLAND New York, which is focused on being an inclusive employer. The program grows in part through word of mouth as the original partners of Inclusive Communities have become its biggest advocates. The Orange County Chamber of Commerce has been very involved in the program, with its president and CEO, Lynn Cione, stating that the Chamber gave its "intern real work which needed to be accomplished, and accomplished it was. We highly recommend this partnership to our member businesses."

The Orange-Ulster BOCES center-based programs are held at the Emanuel Axelrod Education Center, located on the BOCES main campus, serving students ages 5-21 with five special education programs. Students learn life skills, daily living skills, and eventually employability skills that will enable them "to be successful adults and contributing members of the community," Puccio says. She continues to emphasize that programs are focused on what the students want, not what people think they can do or

even what their families may want for them.

#### HIGHER ED OPPORTUNITIES GROW

What the student wants may well be to pursue additional educational opportunities. By partnering with universities such as SUNY Orange, the Orange-Ulster BOCES transition program also helps prepare students to do just that. Colleges collaborate with the transition planning team, presenting at functions and hosting field trips. One of those functions is the Transition and Resource Fair held each year, which brings together around 35 agencies, organizations, and community resources including several colleges such as the College of Saint Rose.

Partnering with Living Resources, the College of Saint Rose created the College Experience program for special education students in 2005. The College Experience is a non-degree-seeking opportunity, even though the participants are considered College of Saint Rose students. They learn how to navigate the various buildings on campus as would any other freshman college student.

Rather than participating in the curriculum of the college, however, students in the College Experience at the College of Saint Rose participate in functional life skills courses taught on the college campus. They learn how to live independently and to maintain employment. College Experience students live in one of seven off-campus dorms, apartment-style houses equipped with kitchens, so they can learn how to develop a menu, prepare their meals, and clean their apartment.

In the first year of the two-year program, students focus on preparing for the internship they will take part in during their second year, including interview skills, resume and cover letter preparation, and other soft skills necessary for success in a job. Their internship, personalized to their specific interests and skills, involves going to work twice a week for one of the many business partners in the Albany region. Part of their College Experience training involves learning how to navigate the Albany transportation system to further enhance the students' ability to



live and work independently.

Colleen Dergosits, with Living Resources and the director of admissions for the College Experience, explains that while the program is geared primarily toward preparing students for work experiences, they can also audit Saint Rose classes. She says that they “try to make sure we are as integrated as possible” as students also have access to all the amenities on campus and can participate in college activities and clubs.

A transition program is available as a postgraduate, third-year option. During the transition program, students increase their employment to three days a week and work with Living Resources staff to find and maintain their own apartments. Dergosits says that 87 percent of graduates move on to the transition program after graduation. At that point, students have developed the life skills and employability skills necessary to gain their independence, typically requiring less than ten hours a week of transition support. Dergosits adds that “when students graduate, they’re very comfortable and ready to get their own apartment.”

The College Experience program started with four students in 2005. Today, there are 40 students enrolled. The program plans to open an eighth dorm in the fall of 2020. There have been 119 graduates to date and the majority of them still live in the Capital Region, as they have built community ties there. Dergosits reports that 67 percent of College Experience graduates are currently maintaining at least part-time employment.

The residential aspect of the College Experience program is a key element, encouraging special education students who are interested to “go away” to college and learn how to live independently. With minimal supervision, they are responsible for the upkeep of their own apartment and for planning and preparing their own meals.

For students who desire to pursue a credited degree, that option is available through a similar residential program, also offered in partnership with Living Resources, at SUNY Schenectady. Colleen Dergosits is also the director of admissions for CareerNext, which began in January 2019 with eight students.

CareerNext is a model program that assists special education students with moving into and succeeding in the college environment, recognizing that it is “very challenging for students to transition from high school to college.” Staff works with the community college’s ADA office to supplement their efforts and to give more support when it comes to the students’ academics and the challenge of navigating their college world.

While students have to meet the admissions requirements of SUNY Schenectady to be accepted, CareerNext helps improve the students’ ability to stay in school and earn their degree. Dergosits says that many high school special education students are “ready for more,” ready to earn a certificate or degree, but just need a little extra guidance and support. In fact, the idea for CareerNext came from meeting with students and their families and hearing their concerns that they were looking for something more and couldn’t find it.

Independence and employability are goals of CareerNext as well. The program works with students on time management skills, to make sure they’re prioritizing, keeping track of their own schedule, and showing up for the extra assistance they are eligible to receive to complete tests and

assignments. Students live in an inclusive dorm setting, in a suite across from the school. Here, too, they have a full kitchen instead of a meal plan so are responsible for their own menu planning, grocery shopping, and meal preparation.

As Dergosits explains, that residential component is extremely important. The CareerNext and College Experience programs are among the “few that offer a true residential experience for students.” Learning how to live and work responsibly and independently, including managing their time appropriately to be able to complete their studies, is critical to the students’ success in school and work.

The City University of New York (CUNY) is another answer to the question of “what’s next” for special education students who desire to pursue a degree and to prepare for success in the workplace. Barbara Bookman, the university director for CUNY’s Disability Programs, explains that their program is based on a grant partnership with the University of Rochester, AHRC NYC, the NYC Department of Education, and the JFK Jr. Institute for Worker Education. According to Bookman, the CUNY system currently has 11,000 students with disabilities, both visible and invisible.

CUNY Unlimited offers a credential program that combines academic

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classes and employability preparation. The classes students take as part of the CUNY Unlimited program are not for credit but are, as Bookman describes them, “similar to audit.” Students participate in the college life, including clubs and activities, while also preparing for “next steps and employment.”

While the program is career oriented, it is also oriented toward self-advocacy and independence. Bookman

adds that “students tend to do better in an environment where the bar is raised,” so the college environment helps them achieve their own goals. On graduating, students earn a CUNY Unlimited Achievement Certificate and are equipped with social skills, soft skills, and employability skills.

Support for the program is provided by the AHRC NYC Melissa Riggio Program for students participating at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, College of Staten Island, Hostos Community College, and Kingsborough Community College. CUNY Unlimited students on those campuses must be age 21 or older, must be eligible for services provided by the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD), and must live in the borough of their campus.

CUNY LEADS is a program “linking employment and academic disability services,” as Bookman describes it. Initially grant funded by Adult Career and Continuing Education Services – Vocational Rehabilitation (AC-

CES-VR), the program is now a permanent part of the CUNY educational experience for special education students. After the three-year grant ended, Bookman found that “70 percent of our students seeking employment were able to gain employment within a year” so they decided to continue the program.

Project REACH at CUNY is designed to serve the growing population of students on the autism spectrum. Resources in Education on Autism as CUNY’s Hallmark (REACH) is currently grant funded and is focused on educating staff and faculty about the many issues unique to the autism population. The pilot program is available on five CUNY campuses and has already proven to help autistic students succeed in their college aspirations.

While all of these programs are effective in helping special education students go on to the next step, whether that is a career or higher education, the key to their success is the students themselves. CUNY’s Bookman advis-

es that students should “understand that the college search is no different if you have a disability.” The services are “there for them. There is no more special ed, but they will be more successful if they take advantage of the opportunities.”

Dergosits, the director of admissions for the College Experience at the College of Saint Rose and CareerNext at SUNY Schenectady, adds that “educating students and families as early as possible that these opportunities exist” is critical. She says that “many families don’t realize that college is an option.”

All agree that learning as much as possible about college programs and work prep programs, as soon as possible, is just as important for special education students as for any other high school students. Dergosits emphasizes that students need to start early to explore college options, that “more often than not they start the process too late.”

In fact, programs that start earlier, such as the Orange-Ulster BOCES transition program, can help students and their families determine which opportunities best suit their goals and dreams. College fairs and campus visits can help students and their families determine the best fit for the student. Connecting with programs at schools such as CUNY, the College of Saint Rose, and SUNY Schenectady can help high school administrators learn more about the options available to those students after graduation, so they are better equipped to guide students through decisions about their next step.

After making that transition, it is critical for the student to learn the responsibilities of self-assessment, self-disclosure, and self-sufficiency. Orange-Ulster BOCES Transition Coordinator Puccio adds that these programs are designed to augment the basics of the ADA office, to help students develop the “skills they need to be successful adults and contributing members of the community.”

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PAT FONTANA is a business writer and communications trainer with a background in corporate training and community college instruction. Her business, WordsWorking, focuses on improving workplace communications, concentrating on the fundamentals of human interactions.

## ADDITIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

There are many programs throughout New York that are focused on life after high school for special education students, teaching valuable life skills and offering quality workforce transition supports.

Most BOCES offer such programs, as do a growing number of colleges and universities, such as the program at the College of Saint Rose featured in this article.

Support levels and program options vary from college to college – here are a few others that can be found around the state:

- InclusiveU at **Syracuse University**, an initiative of The Lawrence B. Taishoff Center for Inclusive Higher Education, for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- Career Ready Boot Camp and the Neurodiverse Hiring Initiative at **Rochester Institute of Technology**, for students with autism.
- The Program for Academic Learning Skills (PALS) at **Hofstra University**, for students with specific learning disabilities and ADD or ADHD.
- Vocational Independence Program (VIP) at the **New York Institute of Technology**, for students with learning differences and autism spectrum diagnoses.
- BRIDGES at **SUNY Orange**, an approved Comprehensive Transition Program (CTP) for students with ID, DD, and ASD.