PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The goal of the Learning Academy at USF is to establish an authentic college experience on campus to serve individuals with ASD who have completed their education and have not been successful in their efforts in post secondary education or employment. Specific objectives are as follows:

- To provide a rich experience through coursework to enable students to enhance and advance their job seeking or college preparation skills
- To provide an inclusive, authentic experience for students with disabilities with age appropriate peers that provides classroom based and experiential learning
- To increase personal knowledge and technical skills of each participant that leads to successful adult experiences
- To provide experiential opportunities that lead to successful career and employment outcomes and to improve the ability of participants to gain college acceptance and social and academic success.

PROJECT STEPS

In order to achieve the established objectives, a timeline identifying critical activities was developed. It was determined that it would require five months of planning time to begin the program. The general activity areas identified in the timeline were outreach, students, mentors, staff, evaluation and logistics. A series of tasks were listed with an identified completion date. Many of the tasks were performed simultaneously.

In the area of outreach, a logo and brochure were developed early on. A power point presentation highlighting the program was also developed. An application process was established and disseminated to all of the individuals known to CARD-USF meeting program eligibility criteria. We created a mentor job description and began recruitment efforts through our internal USF resources (such as attending a campus part time job fair). Both student and mentor interviews took place and the selection of each group was accomplished by April. We also initiated a search for an instructor and selected someone meeting our criteria during this period.

Our team developed materials for orientation. We held an informative orientation for family members, students and mentors. We provided mentors with information about ASD, mentoring basics, and the goals and expectations of the program. Families received both information about the program and the USF campus. Student orientation consisted of program information and expectations, a campus tour, and opportunities to get to know one another. The highlight of the orientation process was a "speed mentoring" activity where each student got the opportunity to spend a brief time with each mentor and share
information about himself/herself. Students and mentors then identified their top three individuals they felt they connected with and mentor assignments were made.

Our team reviewed and modified a curriculum developed by the Institute on Disabilities at Temple University for a similar program for individuals with intellectual disabilities and customized it for individuals diagnosed with autism. The Learning Academy invited 12 professionals, family members and individuals to participate on an advisory board that would support the evaluation efforts of this project. This group assisted us in developing a sound system for evaluating the outcomes of this pilot project with fidelity and reliability. We administered the Ansell Casey Life Skills Assessment Data & Reports (ACLSA) to each Learning Academy student and their caregiver. This provided us with a pre-test measure of the current life skills for each of the Learning Academy students. It is our intention to administer the assessment at the end of the final semester to assess growth and/or attainment of skills from both the participants and their caregiver's perspective. The ACLSA is a self-administered evaluation tool to help young adults discover their strengths and those areas where needs exist. It can be a valuable tool to help youth plan for their future. The assessment measures skills in seven domains including career planning, communication, daily living, home life, housing and money management, self care, and social relationships. Most of these domains are aligned with and addressed in the Learning Academy curriculum. During this period, logistics included activities such as acquiring classroom space, the process for obtaining student ID's, ordering supplies and equipment and planning for the orientation process.

Semester 1 of the Learning Academy consisted of six hours of class time and six hours of mentor time for 10 weeks. Topics covered during semester 1 included: becoming knowledgeable about specific disabilities and how it individually affects a person's learning; discovering individual learning styles and becoming familiar with accommodations and supports that worked best for their style. Students also conducted research on famous people with disabilities and presented their findings. The difference between high school and college was explored and students learned about the important laws that could impact them in higher education or in employment. Self advocacy, stress management, time management, and organizational skills were also covered.

Semester 2 consisted of four hours per week of class time and four hours of mentoring time for 15 weeks. This semester focused on career exploration and self-assessment. Skills, interests, values, work ethic, and preferences were explored utilizing a variety of self-assessment tools. Each student prepared a power point presentation of their findings and presented them to an audience of family members, friends, and staff. Based on the information presented, staff began to develop customized internship sites for each student that reflected their personal preferences and interests. Internships in writing, art, graphic design, animals, and library science, to name a few, were secured. One student put in motion specific steps to create a small business and will try out her products through participation in a campus weekly vendor market. Another student with a specific interest in history is providing a biweekly presentation to a group of senior citizens about significant dates in history during the week and leading a discussion. We have a student
interested in journalism researching, developing content and writing a monthly newsletter at an assisted living facility. He is also formatting and distributing the final product.

Internships began during Semester 3. Students keep a weekly journal about their experiences and discuss challenges and accomplishments in a weekly seminar. Staff maintains contact with the internship sites and provides ongoing support.

**PROJECT OUTCOMES**

The Learning Academy at USF has achieved all of the identified outcomes set forth in our original conceptualization of the program. Participants have specific knowledge of their strengths, abilities, and preferences and will leave the program prepared to capitalize on them. They will each have a defined plan with connections established with the appropriate organizations or agencies; an awareness of what supports and accommodations they need in order to succeed; and an electronic portfolio capturing their experience and characteristics with which to market themselves whether to an employer or an institute of higher education.

"I am beginning to discover what great experiences life has for me as I head closer to my career." Learning Academy Student

"Even with a job I love, I need to develop skills with handling stress and deadlines. I need to be ready as over-reacting could cost me a very valuable work experience". Learning Academy Student

Numerous examples illustrate the success of our objective to make this experience inclusive and authentic. Learning Academy students became acclimated to the sprawling USF campus almost immediately. Students received USF identification cards that provided access to most services, building and benefits. Students participated in campus activities such as football games, movies on the lawn, pool parties and art exhibits. Students were often seen out and about on campus at the library or student center or waiting at a Bull Runner bus stop.

*I learned how to use the BullRunner, and learned about college life".* Learning Academy Student

The Learning Academy was invited to participate in the campus annual disability awareness event. A student and his mentor were part of a panel of students asked to describe their experience at USF as a person with a disability. Students were also invited to present their experiences to a classroom of general education teachers studying inclusive education.

Our students were also embraced by the local community. One of our students with a gift in creative arts along with his mentor came upon a coffee shop that exhibited the work of local artists. After visiting a number of times and becoming acquainted with the owner, this student was invited to exhibit his art.
"I went to Beef O' Brady's, an art museum, and a concert at the Marshal/ Center. We went everywhere fun we could go. "Learning Academy Student

Mentor and student relationships have been very successful. Mentors have become a wonderful resource for our students offering guidance and friendship. Mentors have maintained contact with students after the semesters have ended, have invited students to share events with them and have introduced students to their circle of friends. The mentors report that the experience is equally valuable to them as it is for the student.

"The best part of my mentoring experience was seeing William making connections at the coffee house and growing, and taking the initiative to work towards his goals, and learning from him as a person".
Learning Academy Mentor

It became apparent as we continually stressed the importance of the independence of our students that the family members were in need of support as well. Family members indicated to us that they would like more information about the specifics of course content and information on topics that would be helpful for them once the program has ended. They also indicated the value of interacting with each other to share ideas, concerns and information. In response, a monthly parent group was initiated in the middle of the third semester. It is our desire to provide the information requested and include assistance on helping the families grow with their family member.

"Needs to be more communicative with parents, with regular feedback for students re: learning and internship."
Parent

"My son has increased both his socialization and communication skills. He's also developing independence faster than mom can keep up with. It's great!"
Parent

Finally, we are delighted to have been selected to present at the 31st Annual International Conference of YAI Network in New York City in April. This conference attracts an annual attendance of more than 3,000 people and serves as a major forum for the exchange of ideas and the introduction of new models and strategies that have a positive impact in the field of developmental and learning disabilities.

*Click here to view the Learning Academy brochure.