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LD 46

My name is Tracy Comeau. I am a mental health therapist as well as a father of a teenager with Autism. I just discovered that the "2 year free college tuition" program does not apply to people with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) and/or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). People with ID are able to learn and usually just need further supports to learn. Also, they often go into careers that are supported by education at community colleges.

But my main focus for this testimony is within my specialty: Autism. People with ASD, especially people with high functioning Autism, can be extremely successful in the workforce. Graduating from college not only brings higher income, improved health outcomes, and increased rates of employment for all students, but for people with ASD it also leads to improved self-esteem, access to a valued social role, and greater community involvement (Hart, Grigal, & Weir, 2010). Most college students with an ASD (81%) enroll in at least a 2-year community college at some point in their postsecondary careers. Those in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields were more likely to persist in a 2-year community college and were twice as likely to transfer from a 2-year community college to a 4-year university than their peers in the non-STEM fields. For students with ASD, the benefits also include improved self-esteem, access to a valued social role, and greater community involvement (Hart, Grigal, & Weir, 2010).

For many students with an ASD who have the capacity to pursue postsecondary education, science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) courses may be particularly appealing as previous studies indicate that students with an ASD have relatively high rates of postsecondary STEM enrollment when compared to other disability categories and the general population (Wei et al. 2012; Chen and Weko 2009). Given the increasing interest in the United States (and especially Maine) to sustain a "world-class science and engineering workforce" in order to remain competitive in an increasingly technologically-driven global economy (Nagle et al. 2009), individuals with an ASD who pursue STEM college majors are well-placed to become significant contributors in this important and growing field.

However, the majority (about 68%) of students with an ASD do not apply for admittance to higher education, do not get accepted to institutions, or drop out once they are there. Of 11 disability categories, autism is third lowest in college enrollment and graduation (Sanford et al., 2011). There are many barriers that prevent people with ASD from succeeding in college. For example, anxiety (40-84% prevalence for ASD vs. 18% for neurotypical population), executive functioning skills (perseveration, getting stuck, time management, and inability to be flexible), sensory overload, and major changes in social expectations without explanation. Students report that feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness are prominent in their college experience, which are often more exacerbated in students with ASD. But they are also having difficulties managing workload, time, sensory input, and new social demands (Gelbar et al., 2014; Nirmal, 2014; Van Hees, Moyson, & Roeyers, 2015). Sensory overload can lead to increased anxiety levels and difficulty focusing. College faculty members have observed similar challenges in their work with students who have been diagnosed with ASD (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014).

Individuals identified with high functioning autism have been shown to be successful in postsecondary education when provided with appropriate accommodations and supports (VanBergeijk et al. 2008; Jefferson-Wilson 1999). One of the recommendations is a transition plan (which must be in place, as delineated by the IDEA by the age of 14) to help the student transition successfully to college if that is their career path. Transition support programs have emerged to help students on the spectrum persist in college (Arizona Department of Health Services, 2014; Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013). For example, Taylor (2005) outlines a series of recommendations for teaching, evaluating, and supporting students with ASD within higher education. Glennon (2001) identifies important issues to be addressed by

campus support services for university students with Asperger Syndrome. Prince-Hughes (2003) describes ASD-related challenges for students as it related to college life. However, in the helping disciplines there continues to be a dearth of information addressing the needs of this college bound population. In addition to enrolling in typical college courses, students who have ASD are invited to participate in social groups and mentoring opportunities. Many took reduced academic loads, averaging eight credits accrued each semester. Pursuing a four-year postsecondary degree at this rate would take almost double time, and this is an area that warrants future investigation.

With the current federal deletion of DEI departments in colleges and in the Department of Education, the disabled population is in more danger of having supports that help them succeed in college deleted or just unavailable than ever. Grants at a state level will be needed in order to ensure that students with disabilities are able to have the support services they need available to them.

As a result of IDEA, children with autism spectrum disorders are entitled to supportive services to enable them to maintain their placement in public schools. While this grant is a beginning to lending support to students with disabilities, more work will be needed to truly help this population and I would love to work with anyone on this Board to create a program or grant to help support the ASD population successfully graduate by having the supports they need in college. Please reach out to me at comeautracy@hotmail.com !!

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