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Campuses widen the mainstream

Program welcomes some with cognitive disabilities

By Peter Schworm, Globe Staff | December 10, 2007

WELLESLEY - Dressed in a hoodie and cords, cellphone clipped to his belt, Wilson Lee looks much like any other student at MassBay Community College. Yet in his halting speech and hesitant prose, Lee, an autistic and intellectually impaired 19-year-old, is helping to radically redefine the traditional boundaries of a college classroom.

Until recently, the doors to college were essentially closed to students with cognitive disabilities. Those students typically remained in high school, taking life-skills and transition classes until they turned 22 and could no longer receive services through the public schools. But increasingly, students with intellectual disabilities that prevented them from earning high school diplomas are continuing their education at the college level.

Massachusetts stands at the forefront of the movement, with a pilot program that allows students with cognitive disabilities to attend regular community college classes. The initiative, which began this year, marks the first time a state has launched a coordinated effort to give such students access to postsecondary education.

Nationally, there are 121 college programs for students with such intellectual disabilities as Down syndrome and mental retardation, but most separate the students from typical campus life.

More than a dozen students with disabilities are taking classes at MassBay and Holyoke Community College, and the program will expand next semester to include at least four other community colleges and the University of Massachusetts at Boston. The program works in tandem with the students' high schools, which provide educational coaches to assist them.

MassBay students typically audit a single course, either an introductory academic, vocational, or recreational class.

The initiative, financed through a \$1.5 million state grant, seeks to determine whether students like Lee, who are of traditional college age but unlikely to receive a high school diploma, will benefit from exposure to college life. They are not expected to pursue degrees.

"They've been included all the way through school, but college hasn't been a next step, so they are stuck in this weird limbo," said Molly Boyle, who oversees the MassBay program. "Why shouldn't students be here instead of sitting in high school for three more years?"

Parents and special-education advocates see the growing movement as the logical progression of concerted efforts to include children with special needs in classrooms with their nondisabled peers.

They believe the college experience will serve as a springboard, just as it does for many college students, to a fuller, richer life.

"The whole goal of special education is that students have the skills that enable them to be productive adults who work and live as independently as possible," said Julia Landau, senior project director for Massachusetts Advocates for Children. "The only way to gain those skills is to be in an inclusive setting."

Skeptics question whether students with cognitive disabilities will benefit from classes beyond their intellectual grasp, and doubt they will ever attend college in large numbers. Many would need a significant level of support to make gains, they say.

"There's a fair level of concern and apprehension about how to offer these opportunities while maintaining academic integrity," said Stephan Hamlin-Smith, executive director of the Association of Higher Education And Disability. "Quite honestly, there are more questions than there are answers."

At a recent introductory writing class at MassBay, Lee locked his eyes on the page, tracking the words with the nub of his pen. As another student read the article aloud, the Newton teenager whispered along under his breath. Over his shoulder, his educational coach helped him keep pace, pinpointing the right spot when his pen fell behind.

A limited reader, Lee struggled to make sense of some of the handouts, an array of newspaper and magazine articles about being a sports fan. But he listened attentively, and, with some gentle tips from his coach, was able to outline a basic essay on the topic.

MassBay parents and organizers help students choose courses that they can handle intellectually, will hold their interest, and will teach them skills for future employment. As best they can, students tackle the same reading, assignments, and tests as their classmates.

As inclusion in K-12 education has demonstrated, students with serious intellectual impairments can make unexpectedly strong academic gains when exposed to more sophisticated work, organizers of the Massachusetts initiative said. Such exposure has also led to greater maturity, independence, and self-esteem, they said.

"This has transformed how they perceive themselves, and how others perceive them," said Maureen Conroy, who coordinates the program at Holyoke Community College. "We have never opened the doors to these students and said, 'We're going to fully include you in the community.' But every ounce of evidence suggests that this has been a success and is a viable model."

Academics are just part of the program, organizers said. Students learn to travel to and from college, navigate a busy campus to find their classes and tutoring sessions, and interact with teachers and classmates. They learn to keep a schedule and complete assignments on time, independent living skills organizers say they could never learn in a high school life-skills class.

"It's an environment that can't be replicated elsewhere," said Debra Hart, a national specialist on the topic at the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. "In many ways, the campus is the curriculum."

When their peers graduate from high school, students with intellectual disabilities are often left behind. Many stagnate, spending their days in sheltered workshops, in segregated special education classes, or in regular classes with students years younger.

But if students continue to study with their peers, they avoid isolation and are far more likely to progress, special-education authorities said. Research suggests that students who attend college are more likely to obtain paying jobs, live more independently, and feel more confident.

Proponents also frame the campaign for expanded college access as a matter of social justice.

"I see it as the final frontier in civil rights," said Tom Sannicandro, an Ashland Democrat who sponsored the legislation authorizing the Massachusetts program, and the father of a 23-year-old son with Down syndrome. "It's the final barrier for folks with intellectual disabilities. We've just got to figure out how to do it."

In Lee's reading and writing class, a remedial course for students who failed a placement exam, students were working recently to turn their outlines into short essays. Lee, who has passed the math portion of the MCAS exams but has not come close on the English section, leaned close as his coach, Carolina Brandao, asked about the wide range of sports devotion.

"Explain what a fickle fan is?" she asked. Lee thought for a few seconds.

"They only like the team if they win," he replied.

"That's good. Go ahead and write that down," she said.

After a few more sentences, Brandao asked how he wanted the essay to finish.

"In conclusion?" he asked hopefully.

"More about what the essay is all about," she suggested.

He resumed writing. "The essay is talking about sports fans. Period," he said.

Brandao and Lee's teachers say he has made impressive strides this fall, in and out of the classroom. His writing has improved and he understands more in class. Shy at first, he has relaxed among his peers to the point where he now receives some good-natured ribbing from his classmates.

After some initial missteps, he now rides the train from his home in Newton to class, then to downtown Boston to his father's office, on his own. He zips around the school cafeteria, once an overwhelming place, with ease.

He admits that college has been difficult and that he gets a little frustrated at times. But he thinks he is gradually getting the hang of it. He wants to take an anatomy class so he can work with his father, a chiropractor, he said.

Lee isn't much for talking about himself, preferring to chat about sports or the weather. But when asked what college means to him, he answers: "It's like I'm like everyone else."

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