

HIGHER EDUCATION

Students with disabilities get an extra hand in transition to college

College Living Experience teaches academic, independent living and social skills to students from across the country.

By [Matt Presser](#)

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It was Jennifer Galjour's sophomore year of high school in Corpus Christi when her doctor told her that attending college would be a waste. She wouldn't get a single passing grade, he said.

Initially, Galjour, who had dreamed of going to college, was crushed by the prognosis. Since kindergarten, she had applied herself in school while battling not only the usual name-calling and adolescent cruelty but also the frustrations associated with being diagnosed with enough ailments to fill a medical textbook.

Her trip through a phone book's worth of doctors began in kindergarten when her parents learned that Galjour has attention deficit disorder. Before the end of high school, the diagnoses had continued: a learning disability, absence seizures, bipolar disorder, brain damage, hyperactive disorder, an auditory processing problem and Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism.

But the question never was whether Galjour would go to college. It was when, where, how.

Now, with help from College Living Experience, a program that helps students with disabilities transition into adulthood, Galjour is taking classes at Austin Community

College.

Getting there wasn't easy.

After high school, Galjour went to Coastal Bend College in Beeville. But her grades weren't good, things didn't work out with her roommate and continued medical problems required her to drop out.

It seemed as if that doctor who doubted her abilities might be right. And then Galjour's mom, Dolly, who lives in Corpus Christi, heard about College Living Experience and its Northwest Austin offices.

The program, which has six branches across the country, provides the structure that students with disabilities need to function independently. Most students live in apartments within walking distance of their colleges and the program's offices, take classes on cooking and managing their finances, and get tutoring tailored to their courses.

Dolly Galjour, a former special education teacher and counselor, said she immediately knew the program would be good for her daughter. But Jennifer Galjour, who was so apprehensive she broke down and cried during her admissions interview, wasn't so sure.

Now seven months in, Galjour and her mom agree she's a new person.

And her grades? Although she was failing her math class just six weeks before the final exam, not only did Galjour pass, she ended up with a 3.0 grade point average.

Under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, students from kindergarten through high school with disabilities are entitled to an individualized education program to meet their needs.

But once they enter college, that support often drops off. Only 12.5 percent of working-age people with disabilities have bachelor's degrees, according to data from Cornell University.

"It is very difficult for (students with disabilities) to go to college without some meaningful support," said Mark Claypool, president and CEO of Educational Services of America Inc., College Living Experience's parent company. "It's just an overwhelming environment. It is for any college freshman, but you take these kids and you really multiply it by 10."

The program started in Austin in 2006 and now enrolls 32 students, most of whom are from Texas.

Tuition is about \$30,000 a year, which doesn't include classes, books, or room and board. It does include the guidance they need and enough auxiliary support, in the form of life

skills classes, tutoring sessions and social activities, to pack their schedules.

"We're not just looking at a student from one lens," said Mary Adams, who runs the Austin site. "We're looking at a student in a holistic fashion. We're looking at the things that might cause roadblocks for them, not only academically, but also in their households or their finances."

When Dan Shedd, 20, came to the program as one of its original students, he didn't think he needed the extra support. Born prematurely, Shedd contracted meningitis as a baby, causing permanent neurological damage and limiting his use of his left hand. He attended a New York boarding high school for students with disabilities and had hoped to go college, but his parents told him to first get some extra support from College Living Experience.

In about two years, Shedd has improved his grades at ACC and is applying to transfer to St. Edward's or a few other universities next fall.

"In the end, I think ACC was definitely the right choice because now I do have the grades, and I've learned a couple things, too," he said. "The thing I most like about CLE is that they don't watch you like a hawk. They let you do what you want to do, but they step in when you need help."

Galjour hopes to get her associate's degree from ACC and then find a job making PowerPoint presentations.

"I just want to prove to people that just because I'm different from you, I can still do it," she said.

After a second to think, she added one more item to her post-graduation to-do list — and it involves her eventual college diploma and that doctor who doubted her.

"I want to shove it in his face," she said, grinning.

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