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OU Transitions provides college, life experience

By *Rebecca Wyatt*, OU Web Writer

College opens doors for all who attend, and for a group of developmentally challenged students, it is opening doors to independence, self-advocacy and choices. The students are part of the OU Transition Program for individuals with cognitive impairments who have not received a high school diploma but are eligible for special education services.

OU works with **Oakland Schools** and **Rochester Community Schools** to provide an age-appropriate setting as the students learn about the responsibilities of adult life. The program is an alternative to a basic life skills program that many districts offer to special education students after high school. It is designed to give students an entirely different experience...a college experience.

"This is probably the best I have had it in all my public schooling," said Rachael Kollman, a student who joined the program last January. "I keep pretty busy here on campus."

Kollman is learning Spanish and taking a history class, which she would like to continue during the winter semester. She also has aspirations to take classes in sign language and theater. In her free time, she likes to hang out in the Oakland Center and take yoga lessons in the Rec Center.

The Transition students sit in on regular classes and complete the work with accommodations. They have taped lectures, student note-takers, test and paper accommodations, and classmates who routinely study with them. They also receive a chance at an education in a college environment, which is something many were told they would never have, according to Brynn Lawrence, on-campus facilitator of the program.

"Their experience is what it was like for us in school," said Lawrence, adding that it's more than that for these students. "It increases their self advocacy, self confidence and independence."

The students have freedom to go places on campus and choose classes and activities for themselves.

"It's an opportunity they wouldn't normally have," said Maureen Wilson, a paraprofessional who works with the program.

Students in the program take two to four classes based on their interests and course availability. They don't receive credit for the courses they take. Instead, they work toward personalized goals on individualized education plans, which is something every special education student in public school has. The students are not considered a priority for OU class registration. Lawrence works with the students to find classes they want to take and professors who have room and can accommodate the students' special needs.

"They choose the stuff they want to learn about while they have the chance," Lawrence said.

The students also have volunteer jobs on campus, participate in student organizations and soak up the college atmosphere.

Nathan Fischer, a student in the program since fall 2003, gets to explore his musical interests here on campus. He takes an African drumming class, a class about music in films, participates in the OU Pep Band and volunteers at the campus radio station, **WXOU**, where he files CDs used by the disc jockey.

Another student who started with the program last fall, Elizabeth Martin, volunteers at Lowry Early Childhood Center where she helps prepare snacks and plays with the children.

"I like the kids. They are so cute," Martin said.

Martin also works at the **Educational Resource Library** cleaning and organizing books, which she balances with two classes and swimming lessons. In her free time, she likes to go to the Oakland Center, especially Bumpers Game Room.

Micah Fialka-Feldman also has been in the program since fall 2003 and enjoys campus life and being a college student.

"It's a fun college program," Fialka-Feldman said. "I hope a lot of other kids can have the program, too."

Besides taking classes in government and sociology, Fialka-Feldman is involved with the Social Work Club and enjoys the community service work the club does. He also is part of Hillel, a Jewish organization on campus. Like the other students, he has a volunteer job. He works at the Educational Resource Library and the Language Lab cleaning.

Matt Towers, who has always wanted to go to college, joined the Transition Program this year. He said his favorite thing to do on campus is just hang out and talk to people.

He hopes the program can lead to something more for him.

"I want to eventually take classes for credit," said Towers, who has aspirations of working on a sports talk radio show.

The Transition Program started in the fall 2003 semester with just three students. It grew to four by the end of last year and currently six students participate. It is one of just a few programs like it in the country, and while it has traits of some of the other programs, it has taken on a life of its own.

"OU isn't just about a degree, it is also about experiencing college life," said Robert Wiggins, associate dean of the **School of Education and Human Services**.

The students participate in the program through Rochester Community Schools for two years and receive a certificate of completion from the school district at the end. According to Wilson, the success of the program has come from the support of the campus community.

"The students have been helpful to the students and the professors have been awesome, too," Wilson said. "We have been blessed."

Services on campus also have contributed to the success of the group. The Academic Skill Center runs programs such as study skills programs for the students, and the Counseling Center in the School of Education and Human Services offers career advice to the students and even motivates them with guest speakers who have overcome challenges.

Karen Felmlee, a paraprofessional working with the students, said even though she has only worked with the program since September, she can see the kids growing, becoming independent and learning about making choices.

The students who participate in the program are proof that there is a way for the students to go to college and gain something from it, Wiggins said.

"These students are pretty bright kids who can do some interesting things," Wiggins said. "They have thoughtful ideas in a number of disciplines."

In the future, Wiggins would like to see the program grow and become better known in the community and school districts as a viable option for special education students who are eligible for education services. He also hopes there will one day be the opportunity for students to be residents on campus, which can help transition students to independent living.

"I think the program is a combination of a service to the community and a broader vision of post-secondary experiences to students," Wiggins said.

Currently students who participate must be Oakland County residents, but in the future, Wiggins said, it's possible to have the same relationship with other counties.

The program always is looking for peer mentors and volunteer opportunities for the students. For more information on the OU Transition Program, contact Brynn Lawrence at (248) 941-1188 or blawrence@rochester.k12.mi.us.

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