

Project A ACHIEVE



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The Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education, would like to announce an exciting new project, A ACHIEVE (An Autism College and High School Integration for Educational and Vocational Excellence). This project focuses on supporting high school students on the autism spectrum as they transition to higher education to obtain a degree.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education, has partnered with Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) to create seamless transition planning and programming to encourage success as students enter college, and stay in college through degree completion and employment. Supporting students through this transition is critical, as research demonstrates that many students on the autism spectrum who are accepted into college drop out within their first year due to lack of social and independent-living skills (Roux, Shattuck, Rast, Rava, & Anderson, 2015).

The PASSHE program, currently across four sites—Edinboro University, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Kutztown University and West Chester University—is working to develop services to address the needs of neuro-diverse students. These services address areas of communication, problem solving, self-advocacy, initiation, daily living skills, time management, and executive-functioning skills.

A ACHIEVE High School

A ACHIEVE is the first program in the country that provides an integrated and collaborative transition planning model of services for high school students on the autism spectrum. With the new Pre-Employment Transition Services (PETS) mandate, the A ACHIEVE model provides high school to college to work transition, education, and employment services without interruption for students in the commonwealth (Rehabilitation Act, 2014).

A ACHIEVE works with college bound students, parents, faculty, and staff in high schools, when the students begin 9th grade, to look at the development of independence and self-advocacy skills for students on the autism spectrum. A ACHIEVE provides training, support, and resources for LEAs, students and their families in order to better prepare them for the rigors of college. As part of transition planning and programming, colleges and universities are offering summer programs to transition-age students, so they can experience college life and learn the skills needed for living at college. The summer programs give students experiences on college campuses prior to their junior and senior years of high school. Earlier grade levels may be considered based on availability. These programs include learning how to be a college student, study skills and academic strategies, executive-functioning skills, and group-work skills. Some of the colleges also offer a residential experience in their summer programs.

A ACHIEVE College Program

The college programs are presently on four PASSHE campuses: Edinboro University, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Kutztown University, and West Chester University. In addition, collaboration with Pennsylvania community college programs is beginning to occur. The structure of the college programs varies, though all include:

- Social groups and/or mentors
- Study-skill strategies
- Supervised study, when needed
- Academic coaches or mentors
- Individual meetings for skill building problem solving

- Assistance with classroom and residence life issues
- Liaison with faculty
- Training and strategy tutoring, when needed
- Internship placement assistance
- Internship coaching
- Collaboration with career development for employment skills
- Campus and community training for all departments

The PASSHE programs are part of a growing number, presently 50, of specialized fee-for-service college programs in the country. These programs provide needed assistance for academically capable students with autism who require additional support to be successful in college and their careers. This population needs college degrees to attain competitive employment and adult success. The A ACHIEVE college programs provide the necessary pre-employment transition services, critical to employment success for students with autism. The student, the institution, and the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) will work together to identify a career track appropriate to the student's strengths (<http://tinyurl.com/mbjsgcj>).

Students will complete internships and job shadowing during their college years, as their skills develop. They will also, whenever possible, have on campus employment to learn the essential skills of having a job. Involvement with these programs around the country has informed us that this portion of a college education is key to competitive employment.

For more information regarding the high school or college programs in A ACHIEVE go to <http://tinyurl.com/jya4nak>

Resources

Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Pub. L. No. 113-128, 29 U.S.C. § 3101 (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014) § 101(a)(25).

Roux, Anne M., Shattuck, Paul T., Rast, Jessica E., Rava, Julianna A., and Anderson, Kristy, A. *National Autism Indicators Report: Transition into Young Adulthood*. Philadelphia, PA: Life Course Outcomes Research Program, A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, Drexel University, 2015.

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

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