

# Project TAP Takes Holistic Approach to Students on Autism Spectrum



Between 2008 and 2013, Access and Disability Services saw a dramatic surge in the number of students it serves on the autism spectrum – a 300 percent increase, to be precise.

Faculty counselors, Michele DeCanio and Stacey Watson, set out to better serve this vulnerable population during a particularly challenging period.

With the help of a Resource for Excellence grant from the Educational Foundation, they launched **Project TAP** (Transition Autism Program) to help students with autism spectrum disorders successfully transition to Harper.

“There’s so much support (for students on the Spectrum) when they’re younger, from IEPs (individual education plans) to special education, and then all of a sudden, they’re cut off,” Michele said. “They experience a gap in services, and Project TAP is meant to serve as a bridge.”

The first cohort of 15 students is off to an excellent start, with Michele and Stacey reporting superior grades, new social connections and increased independence.

The program for 2015-2016 kicked off over the summer with workshops to familiarize the students with the campus, their schedules and resources available to them. There was also a dinner for students, their parents and peer mentors.

That peer mentoring component is key to Project TAP’s effectiveness, Michele and Stacey say. Peer mentors, mostly students in the honors or human services programs, have regular contact with the students, work on social and communication skills, and look for ways to get involved on campus.

“You don’t want to hold a social skills class,” Stacey said. “What we’re trying to do is set up natural situations in which students can model behavior. We’re building it into their day-to-day lives.”

Educating faculty and staff is also a focus. For Program TAP students, academics aren’t the issue; it’s the socialization and behaviors. So Michele and Stacey offer information and instructional tips that can improve encounters. Harper police officers are familiar with the students and know what to do if a student becomes overstimulated or has an outburst.

In addition, students are part of the Starfish early alert system and enroll in a First Year Experience course. They shadow neurotypical students and will complete the Job Placement Resource Center’s “Job Ready” program.

“It’s a big concern for parents that their students won’t be employable,” Stacey said. “We work on skills such as interviewing and how to act appropriately in the workplace.”

The pair credits Lori Eshoo in ADS for all her behind-the-scenes work keeping data and designing materials on her own time.

Demand has been overwhelming. A waitlist has been in place from the start, and Michele and Stacey are already fielding calls about next fall. They’re currently exploring funding sources to continue the program. They expect interest will continue to rise as more students with autism spectrum disorders choose Harper, a trend they attribute to improved diagnostic methods, programs such as Engineering Pathways, and skyrocketing tuition at other institutions.

“We have a real passion for this population, and we believe this program is helping them to be successful,” Stacey said. “It’s been incredibly rewarding.”

For more information on Project TAP, please visit our webpage: <http://goforward.harpercollege.edu/services/ads/tap.php>.