

College Support Program helps students with learning differences succeed

by KATE MOCKLER
Reporter

Anyone's who's been there can confirm that there's much more to college success than academics.

Students have to learn to prioritize and cope with multiple deadlines. They have to navigate the personalities involved in group work and force themselves to do their schoolwork in the midst of appealing distractions. This is even harder for a student with Asperger's syndrome, ADHD or other learning differences.

The College Support Program is an offshoot of the College Internship Program, which has been in existence for 25 years to help students with learning differences succeed in college. Last year, CSP opened an office in Amherst, at 4500 Harlem Road near Main Street.

Kenmore resident Mary Lawler approached CSP President Dan McMannon about coming to Amherst. Originally, the organization wanted to open a program in northern New Jersey and have Lawler head it. Instead, she invited McMannon to visit the area.

"He said, 'Wow! This is a great place to do a program.' He was so impressed with the friendliness and openness," Lawler recalled. The program opened a year ago and currently serves nine students, although it has a capacity for 20.

The goals of the program are to help the students successfully become independent adults. Students receive support with academics, social thinking, wellness, residential living and career planning. They are encouraged to get internships and part-time jobs.

The students mostly attend Daemen College. CSP not only assists them with academics, but also helps them with social interactions and serves as a liaison between the students and their professors. The students live in dorms or furnished apartments and also receive assistance with roommate and independent living issues. Several selected Daemen specifically because of CSP.

Michael was one of those students. He is originally from Maryland and had already taken a year of college in Florida. However, he didn't like the school and was seeking to transfer. A program in his field of animation was launching at Daemen, and when he learned that CSP was available, it was a natural choice.

"The teachers are more available, the work is not trial-and-error. A lot of the students say you have to be above average to succeed there," he said.

Michael says his Asperger's syndrome generally doesn't interfere much with his schoolwork.

"I'm a very rare case where it's not much of a mental condition, so much as it's there," he explained.

So far, he has enjoyed Daemen and feels his participation in CSP has been worthwhile.

"Judge with a friend or family member if you are in need of assistance," he said. "If you do sign on to something like this, you must have a lot of patience."

Jacob Blaustein, originally of New Jersey, has another suggestion for those wishing to enroll in the Buffalo-area CSP.

"I would suggest it, but they have to be a good chef," Blaustein said. "I'm not a big fan of the food around here."

Blaustein is an accounting major and will be a senior in the fall. He chose Daemen because of CSP.

"They keep me focused, help me interact more," he said, noting that interaction with others had been a challenge for him. "I like talking, but I don't like interacting. I get annoyed easily. I don't like hurting people's feelings; I don't."



Kristie Kaminski, academic coordinator at CSP, works with Sam Hunt, left, and Jacob Blaustein at the College Support Program Buffalo Center. The center opened at the beginning of last academic year and has drawn students from all over the East Coast.



Mary Lawler is the executive director of the College Support Program, which helps college students with Asperger's syndrome, ADHD and other learning differences.

Galen, another Daemen student, also felt that the program had been helpful.

"It's helped me to get to where I am now," he said. Galen is majoring in pre-law, with a minor in criminal justice. He is doing an internship with Assemblyman Mark Schroeder and also works part time for the Amherst Police Department in crowd control.

Galen cites the support with organizational skills as being key for him, noting that he had difficulties in focusing, not procrastinating and forcing himself to do things that he needed to do.

These "executive functioning" skills are a core component of CSP, where students may work on them one-on-one or in a small group setting. Lawler noted that they also do a lot of "reframing" their past.

"A lot of these students have struggled socially and had some unfortunate interactions with their peers," she explained. "A lot of our students struggle with anxiety

and depression."

This summer, CSP is offering a two-week program for high school students with learning differences.

"It's designed to get them thinking about college," Lawler said. The students will live in dorms at the University at Buffalo and will get an introduction to college. Chris Kennedy, a graduate of the CSP program in Florida and employee at the Buffalo CSP, will be one of the staff assigned to the summer program. He says the summer program will include a stop at the office of students with disabilities, to familiarize them with support services.

"We had to get them used to the fact that people won't be doing these things for him," he explained, noting that in college, it is the student's responsibility to ask for help.

"These students have a lot to offer the world," Lawler said. "They're creative thinkers. They have a unique perspective. It could be argued that the world needs that."

For more information, visit www.collegesupportprogram.org or call 839-2620.

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