Guided by the Spectrum: Using a Participatory Approach to Develop a Neurodiversity-Aligned Mentorship Program to Empower Autistic College Students

Project REACH@ The College of Staten Island

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Resources and Education on Autism as CUNY’s Hallmark

The FAR Fund

Neurodiversity: The Spice of Life!

by Raya

The City University of New York
College of Staten Island
Neurodiversity

• Accepts/celebrates disabilities as valuable aspects of human diversity (minority identities):
  – Reframes “deficits” as “differences”
  – Examines how society contributes to “disability”
  – Views all people as neurologically unique and deserving of the same rights
How Has CUNY Applied Neurodiversity to Improve Higher Ed?

Resources and Education on Autism as CUNY’s Hallmark

Project REACH is a university-wide project funded by the FAR Fund created to enhance CUNY’s capacity to support its growing population of college students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and to educate faculty and staff about students with ASD.

At the core of CUNY’s mission is to provide affordable and accessible higher education opportunities to all students, especially those who have historically not had access to higher education opportunities — like students on the autism spectrum.

http://www2.cuny.edu/current-students/student-affairs/student-services/disability/asd-project-reach
Project REACH Campus Programs

**College of Staten Island - Building Bridges Initiative**
Provides academic, professional, social skills and self-advocacy training to autistic students through a mentorship program that is carefully assessed. Provides autism training to students and faculty to increase knowledge and decrease stigma in the campus community.

**Kingsborough Community College - Transition to College Support**
Provides a combination of direct and consultative services, which are more specialized and extensive services than might otherwise be available.

**LaGuardia Community College - Academic and Social Student Integration for Success Team**
Provides resources and support to the growing population of students on the autism spectrum and integrates students in school activities.

**Brooklyn College - Collaborative Autism Spectrum Program**
Assesses and meets the demand of greater support services for students on the spectrum and the faculty and staff that interact with them.

**Borough of Manhattan Community College - Progressing Autism Spectrum Services**
Improves the chances of success for students on the spectrum by providing specialized services and supports, as well as working with faculty to make their syllabi more accessible.
Project REACH at the College of Staten Island

How To Get Students On The Autism Spectrum To Succeed In College

Students who are part of Project REACH meet weekly to discuss study strategies and ways that autism affects them socially and academically.
Project REACH: Peer mentoring overview

One-on-One Mentoring
(one hour a week)
• Peer mentorship tailored to individual student needs.
• Allows students to engage with a trusted peer to develop skills.
• Mentor training focuses on building equality and modeling planning/leadership skills.

Group Mentoring
(one hour a week)
• Creates a diverse and accepting community wherein students can practice skills.
• Structured self-advocacy, social, & executive functioning curriculum.
• Curriculum adapted each term in response to student interests and feedback.

Participatory/Universal Design: Autistic and non-autistic students are mentees and mentors. Programming continuously adapted based on feedback from students and our neurodiversity specialist, who is an autistic college student.
Perspectives from Project REACH

• Jin Insights:  
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUtbiFPlrg

• Bella Insights:  
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzT_08VjCJl

• Allison (Neurodiversity Specialist):  
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5s_kw3Onow

• Billy Insights:  
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=533nJpcScds

• Nick Insights:  
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7QFjVauBV4
About Myself

- When I first came to CSI, I was lost in this huge campus and nervous about starting this new chapter in my life.
- I was lucky enough to meet Kristen who introduced me to a program called Project REACH which changed my life.
- Although I was unsure about my major, she taught me that it’s okay to be unsure and even stressed out about college life.
- In REACH you can always count on a group of people that will be there to cheer for you throughout your entire journey.
As well as supporting you through stressful situations, REACH also helps you develop some new skills you never thought you can do.

- Ex: job interview preparation, public speaking, and organization/time management skills.

- REACH also let me know that as a student with autism, I am not the only one.

- They’ve helped me learn about accommodations that will make my life more at ease.
What Is Project REACH? (in Olivia’s words)

- Project REACH is an excellent program for any student who needs extra support starting off with college and soon your career path.
  - Racial/Religious appreciation
  - Educational Enhancement
  - Acknowledgement & Assistance
  - Collaboration
  - Hope

- I was once a mentee and last semester I became a volunteer mentor with transition support from the assistant coordinator, Naveen. It made me happy to support a student through her struggles the same way I was supported.
Daniel Lopez
(about myself)

BY DANIEL LOPEZ
About myself

► My name is Daniel Lopez
► I have been a student of CSI for 4 years
► I plan to graduate next year
► I have been a student in Project REACH since my freshman year
► I am a student in a science research program called CSTEP
What is part of myself

- I am majoring in biology and minoring in art
- The reason for minoring in art is my favorite hobby is drawing
- My other hobbies are relaxing and playing video games
- I construct sculptures and paintings to show why I picked my hobby for a minor
- My dream is to become a dentist, so I picked biology because dentistry is close to biology
Bella’s story

Autistic student who is majoring in mathematics with a minor in disability studies at CSI.

Wants to be an adolescent math/special-education teacher.

What I’m doing now to achieve my dream:
1. I’m taking EDP 220 (needed for certification) and EDS 317 (an math-education class focusing on secondary math curriculum) currently.
2. Got fingerprinted in Fall 2018. I took EDS 201 and EDS 202, the beginning of education classes in Fall 2018.
3. I'm currently doing fieldwork at New Dorp High School.

Long-term goal:
1. Finish masters in math/special education within 5 years and work at a middle or high school as a math special-education teacher.
Bella’s work-related experience

• 3. Paid research assistant for Project REACH at CSI: Summer 2018.
• 4. Transitioned from mentee to mentor in Project REACH in 2018; Currently mentoring freshman.
• 5. Did many presentations through Project REACH including one associated with the UN where we talked about how autism affects women.
• 6. Co-author of a BBS (Behavioral and Brain Sciences) commentary, *Expanding the critique of the social motivation theory of autism with participatory and developmental research*, and a paper about the writing skills of autistic and non-autistic students that is under review.
Moving Forward

“I don’t believe that any student is un-teachable...[My disability] gives me something to work towards. You know how when you’re playing video games and there’s no better feeling in the world than when you beat a really tough level? Well that’s what it feels like when I overcome a difficulty...Don’t let anyone tell you “you can’t.” They just don’t want to have to support you. They don’t want to have to deal with it. Anyone who says that is wrong. There is no such thing, when it comes to disabilities, as saying that “you can’t be this” or “you can’t do that”. You just need to push yourself forward, do your best and you’ll do fine.”

-19yo, Male, Autistic
Do you want to learn more about autism or educate your community?

Here is a link to an autism training developed with autistic college students: http://bit.ly/ParticipatoryAutismTraining
• Project REACH is funded by the FAR Fund, so is free for students.
• Project REACH is a collaboration between CSI’s Center for Student Accessibility (CSA) and Dr. Kristen Gillespie-Lynch. If you have questions about Project REACH email Kristen at: kgillyn@gmail.com
• If you have questions about services for students with disabilities at CSI, contact the CSA: https://www.csi.cuny.edu/campus-life/student-services/center-student-accessibility