



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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A COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND SCHOOL DISTRICT SPECIAL EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP

In spring 2012, Parkland Area School District (PASD) approached Lehigh Carbon Community College (LCCC) about developing a learning support class on the LCCC campus to help the PASD special education students better transition into the community. Prior to this partnership, LCCC was similar to most colleges in that its students did all course-required observations and fieldwork experiences at local school districts. In its first year, 11 PASD special education students came to the campus each Friday to use college facilities and work with their teacher and LCCC students who serve as role models and paraprofessionals. In its second year, the program was expanded to two days per week.

How It Works

Each PASD student is assigned a mentor for one semester who is a current student at LCCC or a recent graduate who is continuing his or her education at a local college. Criteria for being a mentor includes being in good academic standing, having completed one or more special education classes, passing child abuse and criminal history clearances, presenting a professional image through attire and attitude, and committing to attending each morning session for one semester.

Through the PASD/LCCC Special Education Partnership, college student mentors act in a paraprofessional role and receive training that emphasizes confidentiality, health and safety issues, professionalism, and communicating any concerns to appropriate staff. The LCCC mentors serve as positive role models for making the transition to young adult life, support study skills, and design and conduct activities to extend positive social development.

The PASD students are on campus two mornings per week. They meet in a college classroom with their own teacher, a LCCC paraprofessional, and other PASD staff (i.e., one school nurse, one speech pathologist, and one special education administrator) to review the concepts to be worked on that day (e.g., finding campus buildings, map reading skills, telling time, learning left and right, and practicing money skills). Specific tasks or concepts

are embedded into all activities and students work on these with their mentors at various locations throughout the college. The LCCC mentors practice one-on-one interactions and active listening and encourage the PASD students to initiate activities that will be engaged in that day. In small groups with their LCCC mentors and with PASD staff nearby, the PASD students use the college fitness center, game room, library, or basketball court. Each day the PASD students and their LCCC mentors eat lunch with the rest of the college population at the campus cafeteria. They also participate in engaging large group exercises such as icebreakers in the Teacher Education Community Room or cooking projects in the Teacher Education Culinary Cove. The PASD students are not formally enrolled at LCCC, but have college IDs and privileges.

The only initial cost to LCCC was a stipend through the LCCC Entrepreneurial Project Grant for the professor's time. The grant is a one-time, one-year funding source. During the second year, the professor's time is supported through Project REACH, a U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) grant that funds faculty professional development, as well as an evaluation and reconstruction of the Paraprofessional/Special Education AAS degree. The OSEP federal grant ends in July 2014. There is no cost to the school district because PASD employees function within their regular work hours and their students ride a school bus that drops off other PASD students at the local technical institute across the street from the college. For future years, LCCC and the PASD are currently seeking funding streams to support college faculty associated with the project. Other area school districts are also investigating the feasibility of entering into a similar collaborative project that could create more opportunities for other learning support students and teacher education majors. Additional potential directions include creating one section of a one-credit course (i.e., yoga) that PASD students take with their mentors and funding a part-time LCCC Coordinator of Partnership Programs.

Student mentors serve as volunteers and do not receive college credit. However, students in credit classes such as Introduction to Special Education rotate in pairs into the PASD program and use this experience as one of their course-required observations. One hundred

percent of students in one section and 25 percent of students in other sections used the PASD/LCCC Special Education Partnership as an observation site during the initial semester. In the program's second semester, the option for this observation was more formalized and used by a larger number of students. Also as part of the aforementioned Project REACH, a new fieldwork course in special education was developed. Students in the new fieldwork class and in the Behavior Management and Guidance course also rotate into the PASD/LCCC Special Education Partnership. Many LCCC students who did observations during the initial semester of the program requested to be volunteer mentors for subsequent semesters. One hundred percent of the first semester mentors agreed to continue into the second semester. The veteran mentors take a leadership role guiding the new mentors as they take on more responsibility (i.e., planning simple mini-lessons for individuals or the group).

Pre- and post-surveys are being conducted to study the impact of exposure to the PASD students on LCCC students' attitudes towards individuals with disabilities and on their intent to become special education teachers. LCCC students taking the same courses at another campus where the PASD students do not attend serve as a control group.

The Learning Benefits

The benefits of this program to LCCC are extensive. LCCC students complete observations right on campus, which saves them time and travel expenses. The college students are offered a unique exposure to various, potentially unknown, roles in special education. By viewing professionals in action, they have a snapshot of occupations including special education supervisor, teacher, paraprofessional, job coach, and speech pathologist.

Because the PASD staff is available and LCCC faculty are onsite, college students and the professor or the special education teacher can quietly step aside from group experiences to immediately process observations. In real time, the professor can offer quick suggestions about how to enhance a PASD student's learning experience or degree of comfort in a new situation, thereby creating a scenario that is much more effective than having a student discuss an off-campus situation a week later during class. After the PASD students return to their high school, the LCCC mentors also process what happened that day with their professor. The mentors also keep journals and email their professor a brief reflection after each session.

Some LCCC students have altered their career aspirations to enter one of these fields. The PASD staff models quality teaching, as well as best practices in the paraprofessional realm. By observing teaching staff up close over a period of time versus completing a one-

hour observation, more knowledge about these roles is ascertained. Mentors build relationships with the PASD students that cannot be replicated through occasional classroom observations. Some mentors attended the school district's family orientation on campus, which allowed them the opportunity to observe family interactions. The mentors are also becoming well known to the school district personnel, which could lead to future employment opportunities.

Welcoming a group of students in a learning support class helps to make the entire LCCC campus more inclusive. College students in all majors have exposure to the PASD students and the student-mentor connection in the hallways, sidewalks, library, cafeteria, game room and fitness center. This experience can help broaden the perspectives about individuals with disabilities for all students and faculty at the college. This collaborative effort has thrust the many facets of diversity, inclusion, and social justice into the lexicon of the LCCC campus community and beyond. The campus has witnessed the strength of human connections and their outcomes. Further, the program has created an open and equitable learning environment with opportunities that promote pro-social values for students involved with the program.

LCCC has intentionally examined and improved its Paraprofessional/Special Education AAS and Special Education AA programs. Through the PASD/LCCC Special Education Partnership, the college has enriched the education of the PASD students, as well as the experiences of all LCCC teacher education students.

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