

Achievement center strives for equal opportunity

Ahana Dave, Editorial Intern 8:36 a.m. EST February 1, 2016

The Achievement Center at Raritan Valley Community College provides students with intellectual and developmental disabilities the opportunity to participate in a fully inclusive college experience.



(Photo: Jason Towlen/Staff Photographer)

After finishing her summer reading book "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime," by Mark Haddon and gathering last minute school supplies, Caryn Croll was excited and a little nervous about her first day of classes at the Achievement Center at Raritan Valley Community College.

"It was a little nerve wrecking," said the 28-year old resident of Franklin Park township.

Piloted last September, the transitional post-secondary program is a collaboration between The Arc of Somerset County, the Branchburg-based Raritan Valley Community College, and The Arc of Hunterdon County. The goal is to provide young students with intellectual and developmental disabilities the opportunity to participate in a college experience at the college while receiving additional support from The Arc of

Somerset County.

Buy Photo



Student Caryn Croll participates in class, Wednesday, January 27, 2016, at the Achievement Center at Raritan Valley Community College in Branchburg. (Photo: Jason Towlen/Staff Photographer)

Unemployment among people with intellectual disabilities is more than twice as high as for the general population, according to a 2014 "National Snapshot of Adults with Intellectual Disabilities in the Labor Force," administered by Gallup. The Arc of Somerset County's Executive Director Lauren Panarella, attributes the statistics to a lack of post secondary educational opportunities, and said the center aims to impact the unemployment rate by focusing on job readiness and career planning.

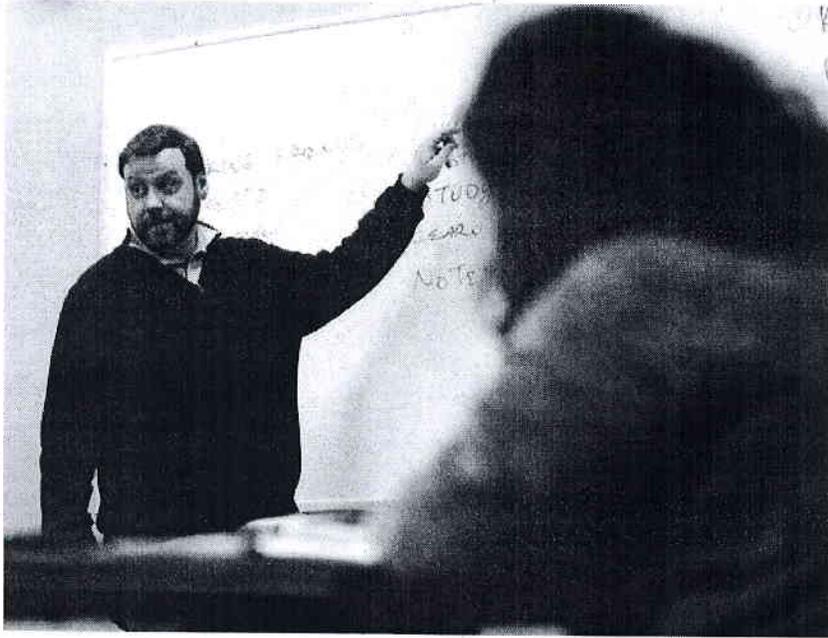
"In the past, college has been largely unavailable for students with intellectual disabilities," she said. "They should have the option to attend a college program if they so desire, just like anyone else who graduates high school, it's a matter of choice and option."

The admission process is comprised of a formal application and an interview, Panarella said prospective students needed to demonstrate certain academic abilities to be accepted into the three year program. In total, three students completed the fall semester of the program, which is still in its early phase, but she hopes the program will enroll at least 12 students next school year.

This opportunity comes at a perfect time for Caryn, said her mother Carol Croll, since the family had been looking for similar programs. They felt that Caryn, who is currently an intern assisting with young children and office tasks at Gigi's Playhouse Down Syndrome Achievement Center in Hillsborough, was ready to be a part of the college environment, but the number of programs available were very limiting.

"To us, it was a gift that this opportunity came out at a time that was convenient for Caryn and perfect for all of us," Croll said.

Buy Photo



Curriculum coordinator Chris Corvino leads class, Wednesday, January 27, 2016, at the Achievement Center at Raritan Valley Community College in Branchburg. (Photo: Jason Towlen/Staff Photographer)

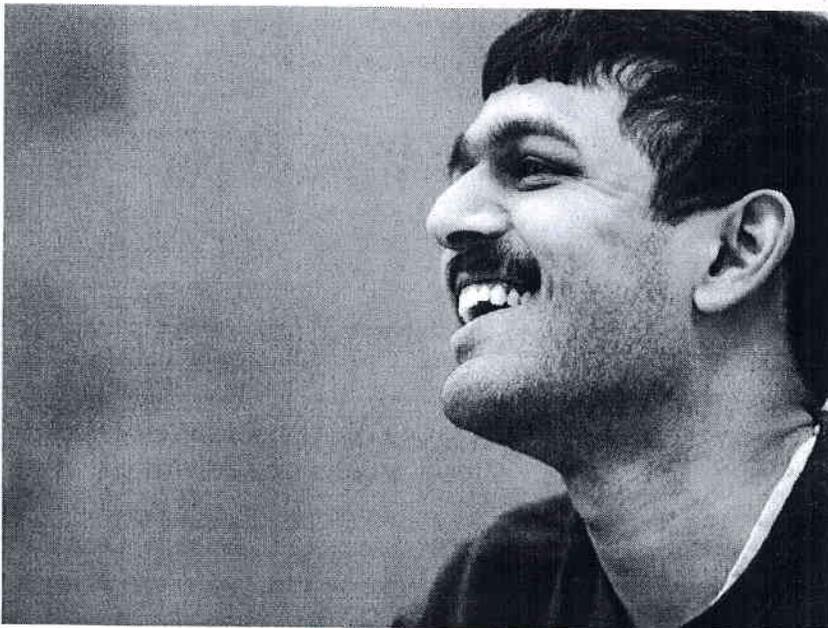
Developing the structure of the classes took approximately one year, according to curriculum coordinator Christopher Corvino, who researched similar programs nationally and drew from his own experience of designing individual education programs for students with various autism spectrum disorders. The culmination of his efforts yielded two classes that were offered for the fall 2015 pilot program: an inclusive class and an academically specialized course. The former, called "The College Experience," is a required freshman course and the latter supported the students in their first inclusive class.

"It's additional time for them to either receive the material or to work on ways for them to express their answers, their reactions to topics in a useful and postsecondary way," he said.

Classes for the new semester began last week.

Diagnosed with Down syndrome and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder at a young age, Caryn said it was challenging at times for her to follow and process the material covered in class. However, she said she was comfortable asking her professors questions and found mentors in both her peers and her parents.

Buy Photo



"Keeping up with the teacher [was an obstacle], sometimes I would have a lot of questions," Caryn said.

Within a couple of days, Caryn said her initial anxiety had disappeared and she not only made friends, but also gained command over sign language. She chose to learn this skill as a part of her "passion project," which encouraged students to independently set and pursue a goal in their area of interest.

"The wonderful thing about the [center] is that it gives students like Caryn an opportunity to achieve their goals and become active and independent members of the community while creating more community acceptance of people with disabilities," said Mitchell Croll, Caryn's father.

Buy Photo



Student Caryn Croll participates in class, Wednesday, January 27, 2016, at the Achievement Center at Raritan Valley Community College in Branchburg. (Photo: Jason Towlen/Staff Photographer)

The program isn't limited to residents of Somerset County and Hunterdon County, but students have to pay the standard tuition and fees that follow a college education. In an effort to offset the possible financial burden it may bring upon individuals with special needs and their families who may not be able to afford the cost, Panarella said The Arc is trying to establish a scholarship foundation in conjunction with the college. Originally, the state was expected to offer financial assistance, according to Caryn's mother, but that expectation has not been fulfilled.

As of now, the Croll family is looking forward to the spring semester, when Caryn take a plunge back into the college experience, an opportunity which seemed unlikely a several years ago.

"We are proud, very proud because this was not expected several years ago," Carol Croll said.

For more information, call 908-725-8544, or visit www.thearcofsomerset.org. (<http://www.thearcofsomerset.org/>)

Read or Share this story: <http://mycj.co/1STd6Mt>

St. Peter's University Hospital
Recovering from a concussion
Feb. 3, 2016
watch video