Using College Students as Peer Mentors for Individuals with Autism

United States

Larry Welkowitz

Organization type:
nonprofit/ngo/citizen sector

Budget:
$1,000 - $10,000
Website:
http://academics.keene.edu/asperger/

- Behavioral issues
- Community development
- Disability rights
- Mental health
- Education
- Mentorship

Project Summary

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

We have been training undergraduate college students to provide Peer Mentoring Services in the form of social navigation, friendship network building, and social skills development for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Colleges are plentiful sources of individuals interested in learning about Autism and helping these individuals with problems in living.

Problem: What problem is this project trying to address?

Like most communities in the U.S., we are overwhelmed by the service demands and human needs related to dramatic increases in the number of individuals diagnosed with ASD’s. A recent study (Pediatrics, October, 2009) suggests a prevalence rate of 1 in 91 persons. The Asperger’s Resource Group (ARG) at Keene State College received funding in 2002 from the Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation to launch a Peer Mentoring Program with an eye towards creating a low (or no cost) approach to providing critical supports for individuals with ASD’s that are outside the traditional medical/psychiatric system. One of our programs focused on training college students to assist other college students who had been diagnosed with ASD. Since that time, we have expanded the program to more broadly assist diagnosed individuals in the community.

About You

Organization:
Asperger's Resource Group of Keene State College

First Name
Larry

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Section 2: About Your Organization

Organization Name
What would prevent your project from being a success?

Most interventions for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD’s) are “pathology based” in that they focus on changing the person with the problem. The Peer Mentoring Program takes a different tact, instead focusing on positive changes that can be created in “the people who surround” the person with ASD. Colleges represent a previously untapped source of eager labor: They are often interested in learning more about Autism and are able to provide services in return for course credit in the form of Internships, Practica, or Independent Study. Our program is unique in that it presents a model that may be useful across the country: Tap this eager and bright labor pool to serve as connectors and support people for individuals with ASD’s. Colleges benefit by creating course opportunities that relate to Autism and related problems, including Asperger’s Syndrome, a milder form of Autism. They also gain monetarily, since College students pay for those course credits. This sets up a “win win” situation in which Colleges, College students, and individuals in the community with ASD’s all gain.

Do you have a patent for this idea?

Organization

Asperger’s Resource Group of Keene State College

Organization Phone
603.358.2517

Organization Address
Asperger’s Resource Group, Dept. of Psychology, Keene State College, Keene, NH 03435-3400

Innovation

What makes your idea unique?

Most interventions for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD’s) are “pathology based” in that they focus on changing the person with the problem. The Peer Mentoring Program takes a different tact, instead focusing on positive changes that can be created in “the people who surround” the person with ASD. Colleges represent a previously untapped source of eager labor: They are often interested in learning more about Autism and are able to provide services in return for course credit in the form of Internships, Practica, or Independent Study. Our program is unique in that it presents a model that may be useful across the country: Tap this eager and bright labor pool to serve as connectors and support people for individuals with ASD’s. Colleges benefit by creating course opportunities that relate to Autism and related problems, including Asperger’s Syndrome, a milder form of Autism. They also gain monetarily, since College students pay for those course credits. This sets up a “win win” situation in which Colleges, College students, and individuals in the community with ASD’s all gain.

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Impact

What impact have you had?

Since the program’s inception seven years ago we have provided mentoring services to approximately 70 individuals with ASD’s and over 100 College students have served as mentors. Many of these College students have gone on to participate in a related program where we train them to provide community based interventions (behavioral therapies) for young children with diagnosed Autism. For those individuals with ASD’s who have received mentoring services, many have attributed their ability to stay in school (e.g., college retention in the case of college students with ASD), maintain a job, increase friendship networks, or find success with new found career opportunities. Many of our College mentors have been so inspired by their work that they have gone on to seek or obtain higher degrees (e.g., MA, Ph.D., Psy.D.) in related fields, such as Clinical Psychology or Special Education. Finally, agencies in our community that provide services to individuals with neurodevelopmental disabilities report a positive impact of our program, including the effects of students and faculty educating community members about the nature of Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome.

Actions

We have created critical contacts with important referral sources in our community, including our College Disability Office (which sends us College students with diagnosed ASD’s), our local Developmental Services (which has made a previous monetary contribution to our program), and, most recently, with local doctors in our Dartmouth Hitchcock Clinic/Keene Departments of Pediatrics and Gastroenterology. The contact with Pediatrics has lead to a collaborative N.I.H. grant to further develop a College based Neurodevelopmental Clinic, and the contacts with Gastroenterology have lead to case conference discussions of the intersection of psychology, inflammatory bowel disease, and patient decision making. My colleague, Dr. Linda Baker, and I have disseminated information about Peer Mentoring through our recent published book, “Asperger’s Syndrome: Intervening in Clinics, Schools, and Communities (Erlbaum, 2005).

Results

As a result of our contacts and the public talks that we give in our community we receive many calls requesting assistance for children and young adults with ASD’s. To some extent, we have even overwhelmed the College Disability Office as a result of the increased public interest. Our hope is to extend our pool of possible mentors to other academic departments (e.g., Health Sciences) so that we can broaden the types of helpers beyond just assigning students from the Psychology Department. We also expect that our connections with the community to lead to new ideas and new programs that are community based and which involve College students as helpers, including a tracking system for young children with ASD’s, a neurodevelopmental clinic, and community outreach.

What will it take for your project to be successful over the next three years? Please address each year separately, if possible.

What would prevent your project from being a success?
We are only limited by time and energy limitations. We have broad support from both our College and local communities. The City of Keene, in collaboration with our local medical center, has created a “Vision 20/20” program whose goal is to create the healthiest community in the region by the year 2020. The goals of The ARG and the Peer Mentoring Program, we believe, fit in well with this vision of ideal community based health. Since so much of the burden of this program falls upon the handful of faculty involved, a challenge is to find the time to do this work, especially in light of heavy course loads and other service demands. We are currently writing grants that provide funds for release time from courses (hiring adjunct faculty to teach some of our courses) so that we can better focus on this worthwhile endeavor.

How many people will your project serve annually?

What is the average monthly household income in your target community, in US Dollars?
Less than $50

Does your project seek to have an impact on public policy?
Yes

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- Sustainability

What stage is your project in?
Operating for more than 5 years

In what country?

Is your initiative connected to an established organization?
Yes

If yes, provide organization name.
Asperger's Resource Group of Keene State College

How long has this organization been operating?
More than 5 years

Does your organization have a Board of Directors or an Advisory Board?
Yes

Does your organization have any non-monetary partnerships with NGOs?
Yes

Does your organization have any non-monetary partnerships with businesses?
No

Does your organization have any non-monetary partnerships with government?
No

Please tell us more about how these partnerships are critical to the success of your innovation.
Our connections with local area agencies (e.g., Monadnock Developmental Services), schools, and doctors at Dartmouth Medical Center/Keene help improve our referral sources and provide placements for our student interns. In one instance, the parent board of Monadnock Dev. Services donated $5,000 to our Peer Mentoring Program. The most critical connection for us in the next three years will certainly be the medical center so that we can collaborate on new projects that will involve more sophisticated monitoring, including brain imaging studies and access to diagnosed individuals.

What are the three most important actions needed to grow your initiative or organization?

1. Continue the application process for Obama stimulus monies being distributed through the National Institute of Health (N.I.H.). Dr. Karen Jennings and I submitted such a grant this past summer and are in the process of modifying it with an eye toward re-submission.
2. Organize regular exchanges between the College and our local Medical Center to foster new programs and doctor involvement in learning new methods for ASD identification and intervention.
3. Create a more “seamless” method for making Peer Mentoring a part of College student activities, especially by working with the Service Learning division of the College.

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The Story

What was the defining moment that led you to this innovation?

My colleague, Linda Baker, Ph.D., and I co-founded the Asperger’s Resource Group as a study group (then called The Asperger’s Study Group) in 1996. The goal then was to learn about Autism Spectrum Disorders with an especial focus on Asperger’s Syndrome. We read original articles and worked on developing clinical strategies, but eventually became disheartened by our limited success in helping people with ASD’s adjust to real life. We tried scores of clinical type strategies, including skillstreaming social skills programs, psychotherapy, Theory of Mind based clinical practices, in-vivo rehearsal of social strategies and bibliotherapy. At a lunch meeting with Joan Welkowitz, Ph.D., we discussed our failures and came to the conclusion that we should shift our approach to more positive, “constructional” strategies that changed community factors, rather than internal “person” factors. Out of that meeting, arose a proposal, which was later funded, to launch the Peer Mentoring Program. This program was not pathology based but instead focused on creating more supportive environments for individuals with ASD’s.

Tell us about the social innovator behind this idea.

Larry Welkowitz is Professor of Psychology at Keene State College where he teaches Clinical Psychology, Abnormal Psychology, Personality Theory, and a Seminar in Autism. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Hawaii where he was first exposed to the idea of the role of culture
and community in creating positive change in individuals. At the U. of Hawaii he studied with Roland Tharp, Ph.D. and worked under his direction at Kamehameha Schools. At Kamehameha, he came to believe that Hawaiian children learned best when schools changed their own culture (i.e., the way they taught math and reading), rather than trying to "change" the child or the child’s culture to fit the school. This idea has permeated his work and is reflected in his chapter (with Dr. Linda Baker) in their book "Asperger's Syndrome: Intervening in Schools, Clinics, and Communities". Dr. Welkowitz continues to promote a Clinical Psychology that questions "Who Changes?" and encourages fellow psychologists to think about community change as a precursor to individual change.

**How did you first hear about Changemakers?**

College or university

If through another, please provide the name of the organization or company

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