

UCLA Extension Provides Pathway for Students with Disabilities

For Sivan Buchinsky, an outgoing 19-year-old with Down syndrome, college has been a long-held dream. She watched her older sister go off to school, and can't wait to have the same kind of independent experience. "I want to live in the dorm so my friends can come visit me in my room," she says. She also wants to get to know campus and learn how to teach kindergarteners.

She may soon get the chance to do all that and more, with UCLA Extension's new Pathway Program, a two-year certificate program for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The program's goal is to prepare young adults aged 18 to 25 with developmental disabilities for independent living, employment, and a capacity for self-directed lifelong learning. And that's what makes Pathway so exciting for these students and their families.

"We've tried all of Sivan's life to parallel what her older sister has done," says her mother, Claudia Buchinsky. "She's been fully included all her life, and college is a natural progression."

Like many of her peers, Sivan has been included in general education classes since kindergarten. She has participated in the Special Olympics, gone to sleepaway camp, and had many of the experiences that children and teens without disabilities take for granted. Until Pathway, however, college was out of the question. A liberal arts college-type curriculum geared toward people

with intellectual disabilities simply did not exist.

"Other programs focus on vocational and life skills but leave out the academic aspect," says Buchinsky. "The academic component of Pathway is very important to us. We want her to understand the world around her, read newspapers, go to museums, and read."

Olivia Raynor, co-director of the Tarjan Center at UCLA and chair of the Pathway Education Advisory Council, says that's what makes Pathway so exciting. "What UCLA is doing is groundbreaking," she says. "The idea that someone with an intellectual disability would pursue a post-secondary education was not even a blip on the radar screen."

Indeed, the idea came not from professionals or academia, but from the families themselves. "It began with a group of families who said 'this isn't right,' and who came to us," says Raynor. "There is growing self-advocacy in the disability community, with people who've grown up in inclusive schools and want to take the next step."

Recently, Executive Director Eric Latham came on board to bring the program to fruition. He began offering some initial courses this Fall and will be accepting applications for admission in February for the launch of Pathway's two-year program in September 2007. Pathway will admit 16 students the first year, and 16 more students the following year, for a combined student body of 32.

Latham currently is finalizing the residential component of the program, which he says is essential for a true college experience. Pathway students will live in a residential setting with residential advisors and eat in campus dining halls. Independent living and vocational skills training will be provided in collaboration with existing local service providers.

Latham anticipates accepting students with Down syndrome, autism, Asperger's syndrome, brain injuries, and other devel-

opmental and intellectual disabilities. His biggest challenge, he says, will be accommodating the sheer numbers of students likely to apply.

He says young people are entitled to the rite of passage that college represents. "Our primary goal is for students to acquire a liberal arts education that helps develop ties to the community and gives them skills to make decisions."

But for Sivan, like many college freshmen, the academic challenges take a back seat to the excitement of striking out on her own in a new environment, "I liked graduating from high school and seeing my friends graduate," she says. "I want to go to college, too." ■

AUTHOR LINK Eric Latham is the executive director of Pathway at UCLA Extension. He's currently a member of the ANCOR Foundation Board of Trustees, and the ANCOR Membership and Marketing & Communications Divisions, and has served on the ANCOR Board from 2004 to 2005. To find out more about Pathway, visit www.uclaextension.edu/pathway. To find out more about postsecondary education programs nationwide, visit www.thinkcollege.net.

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