

STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES: BECOMING LEADERS THROUGH SERVICE IN A CAMPUS COMMUNITY

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Abstract

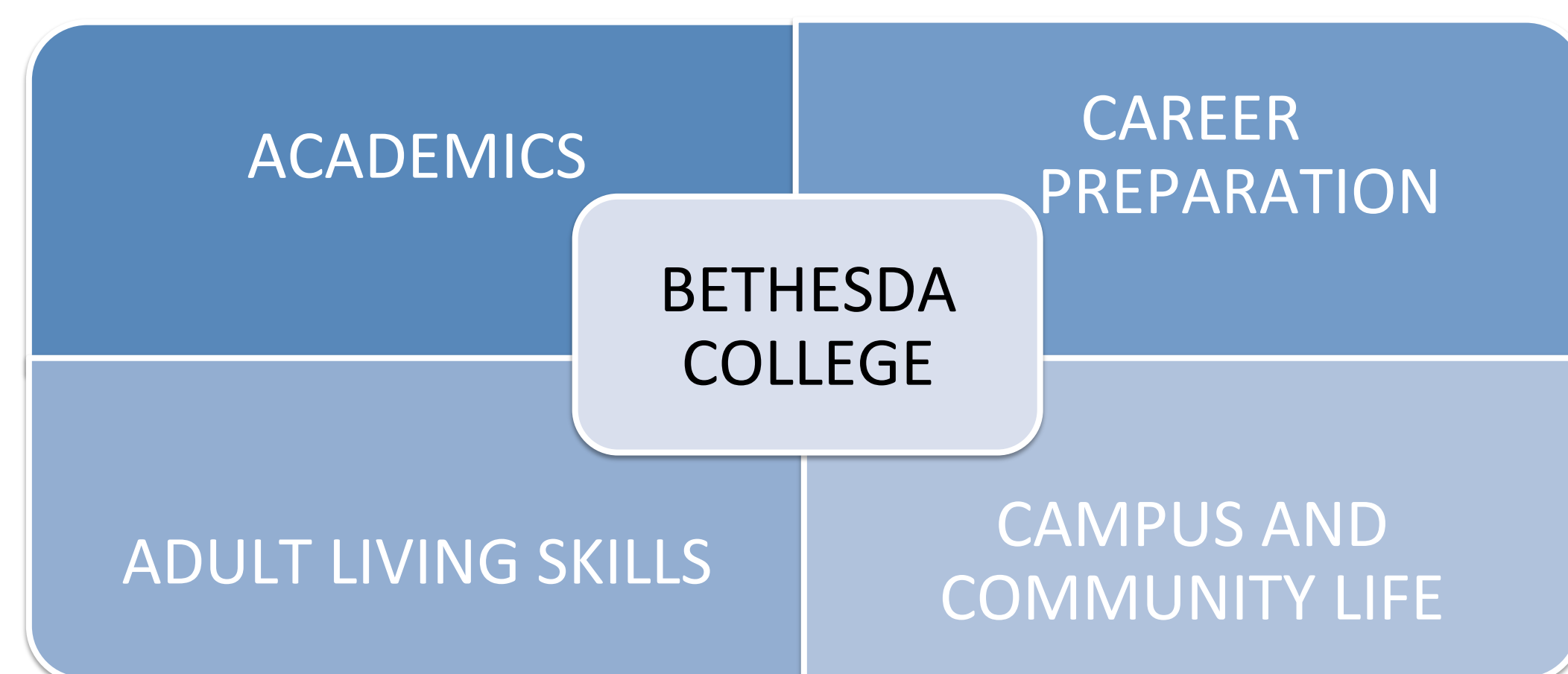
Throughout their school years, students with disabilities have been served by parents, families, other students, teachers, and an array of professionals always around them. Now, as part of a postsecondary college program for students with disabilities, they are immersed in college life, and serving others is part of their curriculum. Transitioning to independence and adult living, these students are eager to give back as ambassadors, teachers, caregivers, team members, and friends.



Bethesda College at Concordia University

The students served in programs such as Bethesda College are those who historically are known as the kids who fall through the cracks. They may be difficult to identify due to the complexity of their disabilities, and are often challenging to serve because they have many more abilities than are ever recognized. These students may not fit in regular college programs with high level requirements, or in workshops or other services on the lower end of the service continuum. They are students who are highly motivated to go to college like their siblings and peers, and are searching for pathways to a meaningful life.

Bethesda College is a two year certificate program in the inclusive university environment of Concordia University Wisconsin. The program is designed to meet the higher education needs of students with intellectual and other significant disabilities by providing experiences in the whole range of college learning and life, including dormitory living. The goal of the program is to prepare students for independent adult living and employment. Following the CUW Mission of “helping students develop in mind, body, and spirit for service to Christ in the Church and the world”, the program provides a blended model of instruction centered on the intellectual, vocational, social, personal, and spiritual growth of its students. The Bethesda College program integrates a sequence of formal instruction in four areas: Academics, Career Preparation, Adult Living Skills, and Campus/Community Life. Group instruction and development of the whole person are emphasized supported by individual advising, coaching, and tutoring.



The practicum part of the Campus and Community Life class involves participation in a variety of campus activities and clubs, and centers on service as a method for fuller integration of students with disabilities and other university students. One goal of this service learning approach is building a more reciprocal, cohesive and caring university community. Other important goals for Bethesda College students are learning and practicing the concept of being of service, and giving back to the college community in preparation for living and being of service in the larger community beyond college. Students include service learning artifacts in their portfolios and receive credit for their service activities as activities link with classes.

Theoretical Framework

In 2008, amendments to the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) further provided access to higher education for students with Intellectual Disabilities. This enabled students to attend college and experience service learning.

"Service-learning combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity changes both the recipient and the provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content."
- Learn and Serve America's National Service-Learning Clearinghouse

According to the National Community Service Act of 1990:

The term "service-learning" means a method under which students or participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that:

- is conducted in and meets the needs of a community;
- is coordinated with a school, institution of higher education, or community service program, and with the community helps foster civic responsibility;
- is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum, or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled provides structured time for the students or participants to reflect on the service experience.

There are four types of service learning:

- 1) Person to person service such as volunteering to drive senior citizens.
- 2) Indirect-Service to achieve a goal such as a coat drive.
- 3) Advocacy-Raising public awareness such as an anti-smoking campaign.
- 4) Community-Based-Students, faculty, and community people working together to solve a community problem such as building a playground in a park.

According to Kraft & Krug (1994) a service-learning program gives educational experiences

- that provides students with opportunities to use newly-acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities; and
- that enhance what is taught by extending student learning beyond the classroom into the community and helps to foster the development of a sense of caring for others.



Bethesda College represents an innovative partnership approach to postsecondary program development for students with intellectual disabilities. The two partners - Concordia University Wisconsin, a university community, and Bethesda Lutheran Communities, a disabilities service organization, combine expertise to establish this unique program. Thus, Bethesda College leverages the strengths of the two institutions to prepare cohorts of students for more independent living and functioning in society.

Generally, students applying for Bethesda College have one or more identified disabilities such as Intellectual, Developmental, Physical, Learning, non-verbal Learning Disabilities, Language Disorders, Autism, High Functioning Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, Other Health Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, Visual or Hearing Impairments, or Social/Emotional/Behavioral Disorders.



Bethesda College Serves

Bethesda College Serves - the service learning component of Bethesda College. BC students serve the community by:

- * working in the Lunch To Go program, Ronald McDonald House, Milwaukee.
- * speaking at multiple public events telling their story about BC.
- * talking to other students and families about college and their future.
- * packing gifts into shoeboxes for needy children.
- * delivering Christmas wishes to campus offices.
- * participating in the Autism Speaks Walkathon.
- * participating in the International Culture week activities.
- * teaching teacher candidates in special education classes.
- * doing "Acts of Love" to assist others.
- * volunteering as ushers and set up crew for the campus theater.
- * giving tours to visiting teachers, parents, prospective students.
- * giving presentations at Think College and other conference events.
- * assisting at campus "Respite Day" event.
- * participating in a Best Buddies fundraiser.
- * assisting athletic teams.
- * and more...

This is a small list of what Bethesda College Serves has done. Students learn the value of giving back a portion of what has been given to them.



Students with Intellectual Disabilities have an innate desire to be of service, and while doing so learn to be leaders. They are proud of the role of ambassador, teacher, friend, and perform their duties in these roles with loyalty and attention to detail. These students have never been thought of as leaders before these opportunities came along. The role of leader prepares them, like no other, to take their place in the adult world and to be of service to others.

"It felt so good to pack lunches for those families. This was an important job."

"Today I helped someone figure out where the 'Nest was. It was fun to help!"

"When you teach make sure you ask the students what works for them so they can learn the best way they can."

"Lots of people wanted to know about how I like college. I told them I love all of it!"

"I never thought that filling shoeboxes could make such a difference for a child."

"I learn about myself and the community when I volunteer."

STUDENT REFLECTION: How did you feel about participating in the activity? What two things did you learn about the organization or activity? What did you learn about yourself?

REFLECTIVE QUESTION FOR INCLUSION IN UNIVERSITY SERVICE PROJECTS: How does/will the introduction of students with diverse abilities impact your work as service-learning providers?