

# EMPOWER



Helping today's youth with disabilities become tomorrow's leaders in disability advocacy is the goal of the NINJA Conference, which completed its wildly successful third year in June. The conference is a collaboration of the Utah Statewide Independent Living Council, the six Centers for Independent Living Centers in the state and the Center for Persons with Disabilities. NINJA participants address topics including disability rights, voting, internet safety, good listening practices, and goal setting in fun and exciting ways, including a ropes course and a banquet with dynamic speakers. The conference has tripled in size and added an extra day since the first conference.

An important function of the conference is to provide an avenue for participants to apply their skills by assisting them in developing a leadership and advocacy project. Projects are at both the local and state level, including:

- Serving on the Utah Statewide Independent Living Council;
- Testifying before a legislative committee;
- Convincing a local legislator to fund a participant's conference experience;
- Getting a sidewalk constructed on a busy street;
- Working with Utah Transit Authority to add more bus stops;
- Serving on the board of a local CIL.

These students, many from rural areas where there are few opportunities to interact with other young adults with disabilities, make lasting friendships at the conference and are learning that they can have an impact on their world. USILC



Youth Committee Chair,, Jeff Sheen, said "To watch the self-confidence, leadership skills, and friendships of our youth blossom in such a short, but intense period of time has been amazing. We are all exhausted by the end of the conference, but at the same time so energized by working with the youth to unlock their individual potential for making the world a better place!"



## AGGIES ELEVATED

# ELEVATE

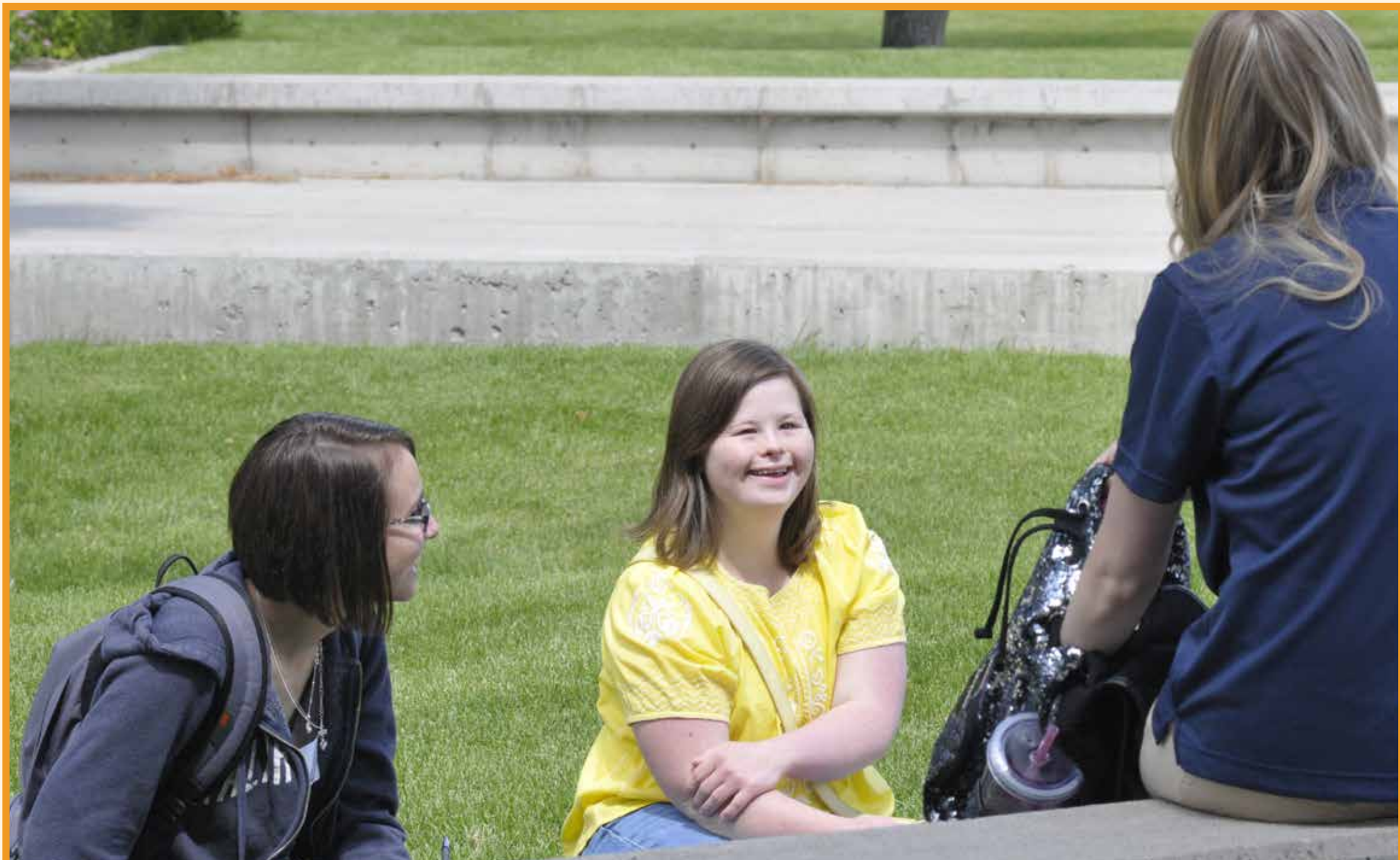
Young adults with intellectual disabilities want what their peers want – a traditional residential college experience, the chance to learn and live independently, and the opportunity to work in a field that is suited to their interests and abilities.

The movement—some call it a revolution—to provide these opportunities has begun, and the CPD is at the forefront. There are more than 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States. Of these, less than 250 have programs specifically for young adults with intellectual disabilities. Aggies Elevated is the only program of its kind in Utah and one of only a handful in the western United States. It was recently awarded a \$1.1 million, five-year Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) grant from the U.S. Department of Education for expansion.

All individuals, regardless of ability, have the right to meaningful employment, lifelong learning, self-determination and full community inclusion. Utilizing the MyCLIMB (My Career Ladder to Independence, Maturity & Balance) person-centered planning model, Aggies Elevated students, along with invited family members and/or other stakeholders, chart their own paths toward independence within an individualized framework of supports that identifies challenges, builds on individual strengths and encourages personal responsibility.



Currently in its second year, Aggies Elevated students are selected through a rigorous application and interview process. They live in on-campus housing, attend inclusive classes with their peers, and are immersed in all aspects of campus life, from intramural sports to special interest clubs. Mentors, tutors and additional study groups help students negotiate all the barriers college presents, especially in the all-important first semester. Career exploration and internship experiences help the students to develop the skills necessary to prepare for, locate, and be successful in a fulfilling career.



## POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT & RESEARCH

# EXPERIENCE

The Post-Secondary Education, Employment and Research (PEER) program at the CPD is designed to help young adults (ages 18-21) with significant intellectual and developmental disabilities overcome both social and educational barriers so they can transition from the school system to the adult, working world. Currently in its tenth year, PEER provides an environment where young people learn, research happens and volunteerism thrives. It offers work experience and opens a door for students with disabilities, allowing them to participate in post-secondary education on the Utah State University campus if they choose.

During the course of the year, students engage in diverse activities, which have included operation of a gift-wrapping service for Sub-for-Santa, hosting a breakfast for visiting USU Alternative Spring Break volunteers, and planning and decorating for a CPD Halloween party.

The program offers young adults with developmental disabilities the opportunity to prepare for employment and independence in campus settings and the community. It places students in an inclusive setting along with their age peers who are enrolled in academic programs at USU for part of the day. The rest of their day is spent learning skills tailored to their individual needs,such as how to count money, computer skills, or how to apply for a job. PEER students are engaged in activities located in various campus and community locations. Students' programs are supported by teachers and paraeducators who are employed by the Cache County and Logan City school districts.



# CULTIVATING YOUNG LEADERS, IMPACTING THE FUTURE

Judith Holt  
Jefferson Sheen  
Sarah M. Bodily

"We spend a lot of time working on skills that will help our students live independently and have greater self-reliance. It is so rewarding to see them growing and learning skills that will help them take care of themselves when they are prepared and ready to be out on their own." Kerry Done,

*"Leadership is not about titles, positions, or flow charts. It is about one life influencing another."* -John C. Maxwell

" When I feel like I'm a part of something, I try harder to live up to expectations. It feels good to feel valued." Annie Beach, NINJA

"The university program helps to let you learn how to do things by yourself. I mean, not fast like college students... I can't do that. But being here is good because I get confidence and after maybe two years, maybe I can take a class, too." Michael, PEER

*I had a dream that I wanted to go to college, just like my other friends that graduated with me.... and it came true. – Sarah Bullen, Aggies Elevated*

COLLEGE CAN BE TOUGH FOR ANYONE BECAUSE ALL OF A SUDDEN WE'RE ALL HERE TO LEARN, BUT LEARNING TAKES TIME. DURING AGGIES ELEVATED, I LEARNED HOW TO TAKE THINGS SERIOUSLY, LIKE GETTING ASSIGNMENTS IN ON TIME. –TROY SHUMWAY, AGGIES ELEVATED

**"I WANT TO ADVOCATE NOT ONLY AT THE STATE LEVEL BUT NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL.... WE NEED TO GO BEYOND OUR ABILITIES AND SEE BEYOND WHAT WE CAN SEE."**  
MATTHEW HUSKINSON, NINJA

**UtahStateUniversity**  
CENTER FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES