

Access to Higher Education: Learning in the Natural Environment

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Bethesda College Abstract

Bethesda College at Concordia University (BC@CU) is a two-year postsecondary certificate program on the campus of CU that provides a blended learning opportunity for students with significant disabilities. BC gives students a full college experience including dorm living, CU and BC classes. BC@CU is an innovative partnership between Bethesda Lutheran Communities (BLC) and Concordia University Wisconsin.

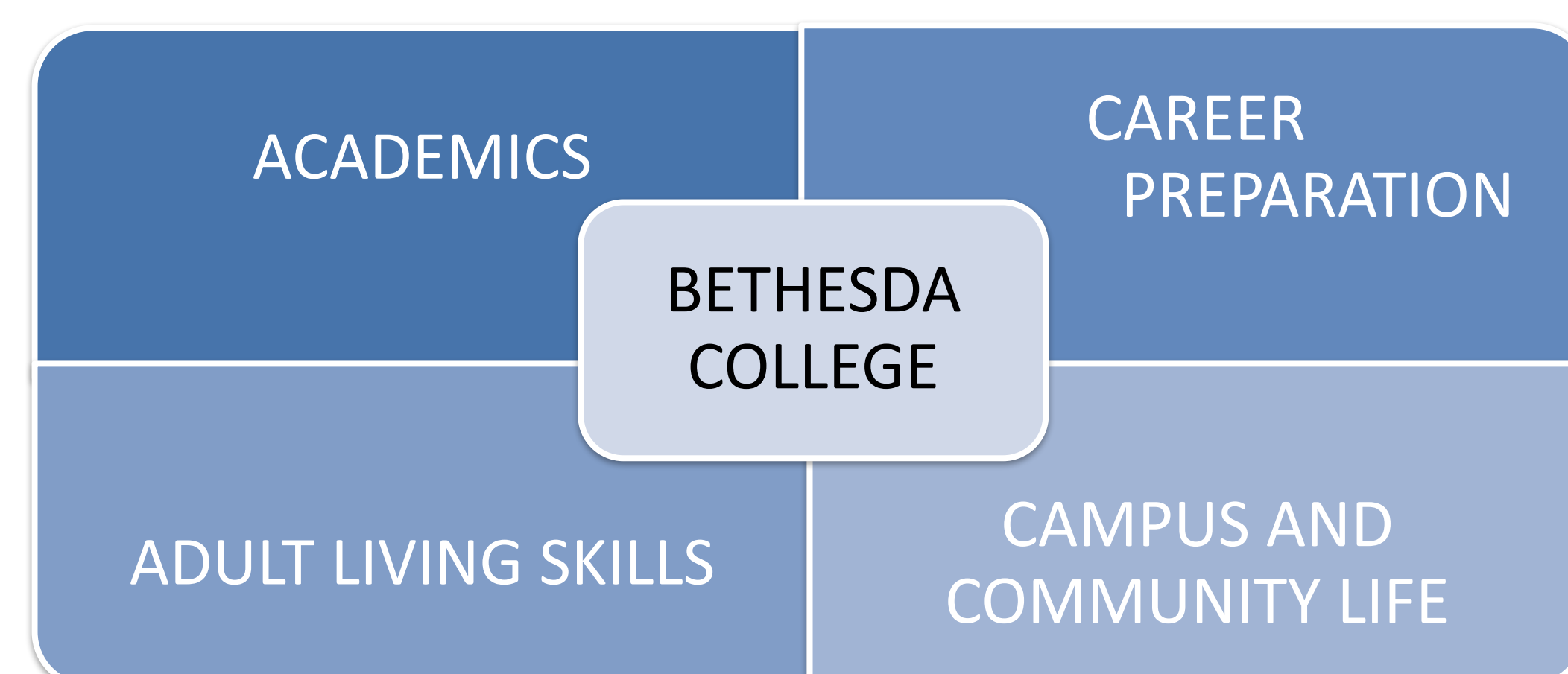


Bethesda College @ Concordia University

Students served at BC are those who historically have fallen through the cracks or are in special education. They may be difficult to identify due to their complex disabilities. They are highly motivated to attend college like their siblings and peers, and are searching for pathways to a meaningful adult life.

BC@CU is designed to meet the higher education needs of students with significant disabilities by providing experiences in the whole range of college learning and life including dormitory living, auditing college classes, and practica to enable practice of learned skills. **The goal of BC is to prepare students for independent adult living and employment in a career path.** The program provides a blended model of instruction centered on the intellectual, vocational, social, personal, and spiritual growth of students. BC@CU integrates a sequence of formal instruction in four areas: Academics, Career Preparation, Adult Living Skills, and Campus/Community Life with a practicum in each area. Group instruction and development of the whole person are emphasized supported by individual advising, coaching, and tutoring.

BC Teaching Approach: Classroom Component - Classes to expand knowledge
Practicum Component - Application of learning to real-life activities
Problem-Solving approach to living in the world as an independent adult with competitive community employment in a career path.
Transition Bridge moving "...from one place to another in our lives."
Independence and Interdependence "...we have tools to help us be independent and successful in the adult world. We can't do it alone."



The importance of the blended model is substantial. Students with significant disabilities need time and support to successfully negotiate the changes that occur in adult life with college being a stepping stone to independence. Frequently students do not have the support to successfully navigate college because of their unique personal needs and the complex college environment. The independence and personal responsibility that colleges expect of students is often something that students with significant disabilities have never experienced because of the comprehensive system of special education supports and services provided under IDEA in K-age 21 education. College is often the first time these students are expected to make decisions on their own, keep up with high academic expectations and performance in classes, and navigate the complex social/emotional aspects of college and adult life.

Theoretical Framework

HEOA: In 2008 amendments to the *Higher Education Opportunity Act* (HEOA) further provided access to higher education for students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID). This enabled students to attend college and experience a right of passage like their peers and siblings. BC is an inclusive program for students with any type of disability, not just ID.

An article published by the Institute for Community Inclusion states "The growth that students experience in college can be measured in a number of areas, including academic and personal skill-building, employment, independence, self-advocacy, and self-confidence...Being part of campus life, taking classes (whether auditing or for credit), and learning to navigate a world of high expectations develops the skills needed for successful adult life" (Hart et al., 2006).

Research reports "A matched-cohort follow-up study of 40 students with intellectual disabilities looked at 20 students who had some type of college experience and 20 with no college experience. Findings revealed that students with intellectual disabilities who had some type of college experience were much more likely to obtain competitive employment, required fewer supports, and earned higher wages. Additionally, students had increased self-esteem and expanded social networks that included students without disabilities" (Hart et al., 2006, p.3). Another study showed positive employment outcomes for students with disabilities who attend a postsecondary college program when compared to students who do not attend such a program (Moore and Schelling, 2015).

"An important question not just "How are we helping students develop" but more specifically "how are we helping students develop *in the context* of the social systems to which they *do* belong and *will* belong?" " (Moore and Schelling, 2015, p.5). This raises the issue of learning in natural environments such as a university campus to assimilate students with significant disabilities into the whole campus community because they will be living in the dorm with others with and without disabilities. These are the adults from whom students with disabilities learn and who will be their neighbors and friends after college.



The rate of college matriculation for students with significant disabilities is low as reported by the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor. In May of 2016, 100% of the first BC class graduated with a Certificate of Applied Learning and received a spontaneous standing ovation from fellow CU graduates thus leading the way for matriculation of BC classes that follow.

Navigating college is frequently difficult for any college student and even harder for students with significant disabilities without support on many levels: academically, intellectually, socially/emotionally, adult living, independent living, and vocationally.

Program essentials:

- Person-centered planning
- CU courses (audit)
- Full participation in campus life
- Independence gained from living on campus
- Full support from the Presidents of CU and BLC
- Personalized learning plans
- Individualized supports
- Career preparation and internships
- Supports for CU faculty
- Colleague support



Generally, students applying to 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 disabilities, Social/Emotional/Behavioral Disorders, or others.*

Hart, D., Grigal, M., Sax, C., Martinez, D., & Will, M. (August, 2006). Postsecondary Education options for Students with Intellectual Disabilities. *Research to Practice*. Issue 45.
 Moore, E. J., Schelling, A. (2015). Postsecondary inclusion for individuals with an intellectual disability and its effects on employment. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*, 1-19.
 Newman, L., Wagner, M., Knokey, A.-M., Marder, C., Nagle, K., Shaver, D., et al. (2011). *The post-high school outcomes of young adults with disabilities up to 8 years after high school. A report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)* (NCSE 2011-3005). Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Retrieved from www.nlts2.org/reports/

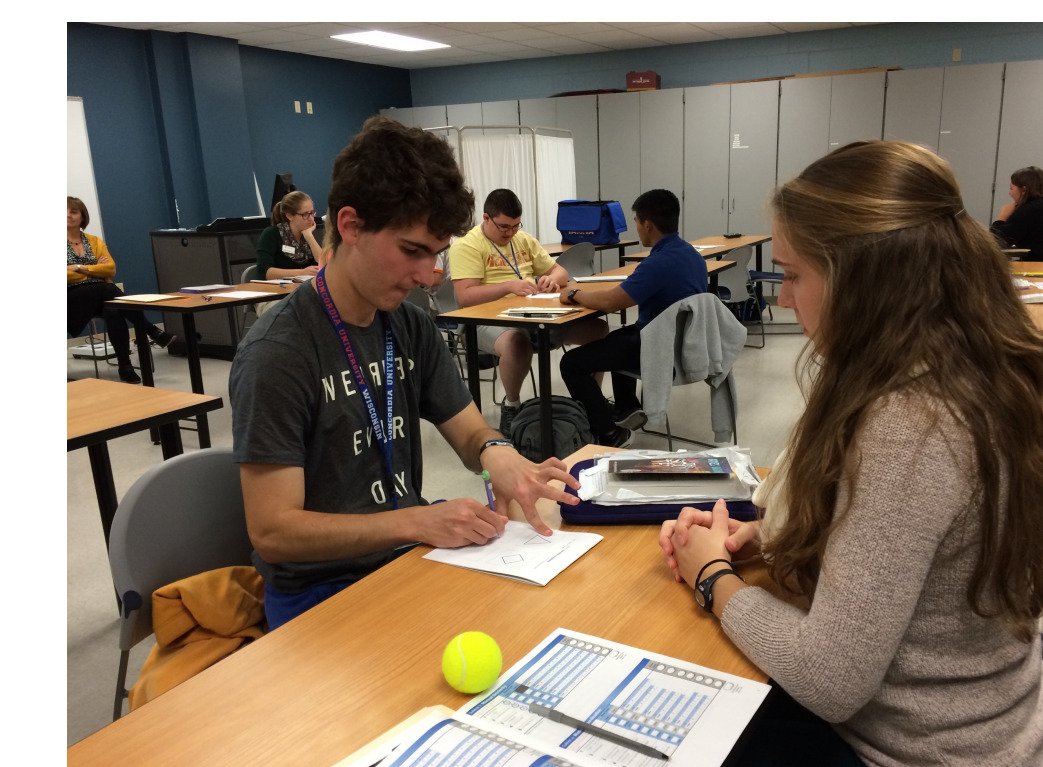
Bethesda College Outcomes

Benefits to the entire campus: While data shows that the BC program provides positive outcomes for BC students, one of the most successful aspects of BC@CU is the benefit to CU students, faculty and staff that developed because of the presence of BC students. Having BC students on campus has:

- increased diversity within the student body
- provided an opportunity for BC students to integrate into CU academic programs in the Schools of Education, and Health Professions in programs such as:
 - +teacher education
 - +physician assistant
 - +physical and occupational therapy
- enabled CU students to interact with BC students to practice skills and provide learning opportunities in class
- allowed BC students to teach CU students how to effectively interact with, teach, and care for people with disabilities, and to see them as valued community members.

Gains in learning from CU student survey data shows:

- close relationships developed among students that would not have occurred without the joint interaction on campus.
- CU students hired as learning coaches to provide supports for individual BC students provide key assistance to BC students and learn from them. It is a parallel program.
- collaboration among students is vital as it enhances community and provides an opportunity to educate everyone beyond classroom academics.



We have learned:

- BC students need supports provided by the blended program model to be successful.
- BC students need these two years to grow and learn how to be a college student.
- some BC students may be accepted as full regular college students after BC graduation.
- dormitory living is one of the most important aspects of the program due to skills learned and used to gain independence and successfully live in an adult community.
- BC@CU has enriched the entire CU campus and provides a means for natural inclusion in a normalized environment for everyone on campus-students and faculty, often for the first time in their lives.

BC Student Comments:

"I didn't think I could teach anything to someone else."

"I am more mature because I am learning to solve problems in my life, and I am learning to get along with others, and I am getting more confident about my life."

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

"I learn about myself and the community when I work at my internship."

"I never thought I could make so many friends."

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

CU Student Comments:

BC students are more than students with disabilities. They are my friends.

I'll be a more effective teacher because of this experience with BC students.

Giving students choices helps them be more engaged. I now realize that.

This experienced changed me. I would have never thought to focus on transition and the possibility that students with disabilities could go to college.