

# Meeting Student Needs Through a Collaborative Blended Program

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## Abstract

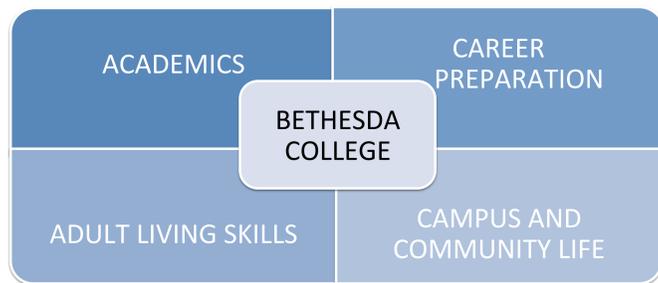
Bethesda College at Concordia University (BC@CU) is a two-year postsecondary certificate program on the campus of CU that provides a blended learning opportunity for students with significant disabilities. BC gives students a full college experience including dorm living, CU and BC classes. BC@CU is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



## Bethesda College @ Concordia University

Students served in programs such as Bethesda College are those who historically are known as the students who fall through the cracks or are in special education. 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 were 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 of Applied Learning 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, auditing college classes, and practica to enable practice of learned skills. **The goal of the program is to prepare students for independent adult living and a career path.** 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, Campus/Community Life, and Adult Living Skills with a practicum in each area. Group instruction and development of the whole person are emphasized supported by individual advising, coaching, and tutoring.



**The importance of the blended model is substantial.** Students with significant disabilities need time and assistance 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 provided under IDEA in K-12 education. College is often the first time these students are expected to make decision on their own, keep up with high academic expectations and performance in college 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. This enabled students to attend college and experience a milestone and right of passage like their peers and siblings.

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).



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 class that follow.

**Program essentials:**

- person-centered planning
- personalized learning plans
- CU courses (audit)
- individualized supports
- BC courses
- career preparation and internships
- full participation in campus life
- independence gained from living on campus

**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 by BC as learning coaches to provide supports for individual BC students provide key assistance to BC students
- collaboration among students is vital as it enhances community and provides an opportunity to educate everyone beyond classroom academics.

**We have learned:**

- students need the supports provided by the blended program model to be successful
- BC students need these two years to mature, grow, and learn how to be a college student
- living in the dorm is one of the most important aspects of the program due to the skills acquired and used to gain independence and successfully live among peers in a community.



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, or Social/Emotional/Behavioral Disorders.

Hart, D., Grigal, M., Sax, C., Martinex, D., & Will, M. (August, 2006). Postsecondary Education options for Students with Intellectual Disabilities. *Research to Practice*. Issue 45.

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)* (NCESR 2011-3005). Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Retrieved from www.nlts2.org/reports/

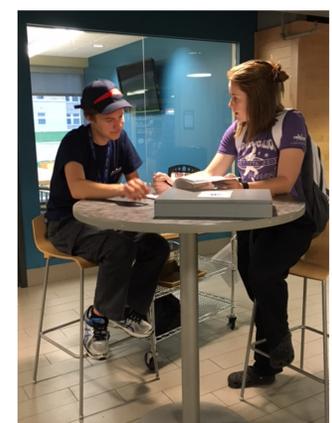
## Bethesda College Outcomes

Navigating college is frequently difficult for any college student and even harder for students with significant disabilities without support on many levels:

- academically
- socially/emotionally
- intellectually
- adult living
- independent living
- vocationally

**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 be integrated into CU academic programs in the Schools of Education, and Health Professions
- teacher education
- physician assistant
- physical and occupational therapy
- CU students interact with BC students to practice skills and provide learning opportunities in class
- in turn BC students teach CU students how to effectively interact with, teach, and care for people with disabilities, and to see them as valued members of the community.



**BC@CU has enriched the entire CU campus** and provided a means for natural inclusion in a normalized environment for everyone on campus, often for the first time. It is important for these students to have the time to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to navigate college and adult life. These two years gives them time to mature, be independent, and show their ability to learn and grow, after which some may be accepted as a full regular college student.

### 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."*

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

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

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

### CU Student Comments:

*The 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 BC students could go to college.*