



Our Mission

The mission of BRIDGES at SUNY Orange is to help students identify their strengths and use those strengths to overcome challenges to lead independent lives. We accomplish this by directly teaching self-awareness skills and self-advocacy skills to all of our students.

BRIDGES at SUNY Orange

BRIDGES is a post secondary college experience for individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. The program is person-centered and highly individualized. The individual goals of the students drive their college experience. Developing social/communication skills, vocational preparation/training and independent living skills are the cornerstone of the BRIDGES program. The students have full access to the campus through audit classes, student body activities, and peer mentors.

Collaboration between Diverse Disciplines

The BRIDGES faculty is comprised of professionals from diverse backgrounds: law, nursing, business, neuropsychology, psychology, occupational therapy and special education, each bringing a different perspective to the students and the

program. At its core, the program is a collaboration between all of these professionals working together to deliver instruction in a way that embraces each student's distinctive learning style and preference.

Collaboration between staff members is the key to our success. Each discipline, occupational therapist practitioners (COTA), special educators, registered behavioral technicians (RBT), employment specialist, neuropsychologist, peer mentors, and human service workers bring their unique perspective to the program and work together to provide an individualized approach that is tailored for each student.

For example:

- The occupational therapist practitioner is able to recognize when a student has a sensory need that should be addressed while the special educator is able to modify instruction to meet the individualized learning style of the student.

- The occupational therapist practitioner and the special educator also collaborate with the student to help them identify possible modifications and/or accommodations they may need in an academic, vocational, or community setting.

- The employment specialist and human services professional are able to help the students recognize their needs and help them to learn how to advocate for those individualized needs on a work-site or in the community.

- Peer mentors are able to highlight important social skills and encourage the students to practice them in a variety of naturally occurring settings and situations on the college campus.

Each discipline acknowledges that we cannot work in our professional silos if we are to meet the individualized needs of the students and provide them with the support and tools that they will need to lead independent lives once they leave the SUNY Orange BRIDGES.

Inclusive Opportunities

Audit College Classes

Each semester students have to opportunity to audit 1or 2 college classes of their choosing. Over the last several years, students have audited a wide range of classes that appeal to their interests or possible vocational goals. Examples of some of the audit classes students are: Creative Writing, History of Rock Music, Movement Science Classes, Computer Science, History of Russia, and Introduction to Media Production.

First year students in their first semester are enrolled in one of two possible audit classes: Concepts of Physical Wellness or College Success Seminar. The students participate in these audits as a cohort. A BRIDGES instructor is embedded in the class and works closely with the college professor to help the students become familiar with the expectations of the college class.

Students are introduced to the college syllabus and are shown how to appropriately refer to it so they can be prepared for class. In addition, students are taught how to utilize the college's learning management system, Blackboard to obtain information about the class including assigned readings, assignments, and projects due as well as how to send and answer emails to instructors.

Most importantly, appropriate social skills are taught which are necessary to be successful in a college class. These include; how to ask a question in class; addressing a question to the professor either before or after class; and the appropriate way to contribute to a class discussion without monopolizing the conversation.

Student Body Activities

BRIDGES students are encouraged to participate in all on-campus and off-campus student body activities. SUNY Orange offers an activity hour two days a week on campus. Some activities our students have participated in are:

- Movie Night
- Make a Stuffed Animal
- Design a T-shirt
- Halloween BINGO
- Student Life Day
- Holiday Prize Giveaway
- Stress Free Zone: featuring Therapy Dogs

BRIDGES students are also encouraged to join Student Clubs and Organizations.

Some favorites are:

- Criminal Justice Club
- Outdoor Club
- Dance Club

Our program also has its own club on campus -“BRIDGES Club” - where students get the opportunity to hold an office position, organize fundraisers, and plan campus activities. Club members are able to attend COLT Night where they can take classes on goal setting and team building.

Vocational Development

Year 1: Vocational Exploration: - Students spend the first year in the SUNY Orange BRIDGES program exploring different career pathways/clusters and identifying their personal strengths, interests, values, and goals related to the world of work. Students complete a variety of different career assessment, identify their personal Holland Code, and are able to clearly articulate areas of employment they are most interested in pursuing.

Year 2: Introduction to Employment: - Students spend the second year in the SUNY Orange BRIDGES program learning the “soft skills” that are necessary when entering the workforce. An emphasis on communication, the importance of enthusiasm and positive attitude, and the development of a growth mindset are all taught. Their coursework includes developing a resume, filling out applications, practicing interviewing skills, and obtaining letters of reference.

Year 3: Career Seminar and Internships: - Students spend their final year honing the “soft skills” they will need to master to enter the workforce. In addition, each student participates in a year long internship in the community that closely aligns with their identified area of vocational interest.

Examples of Internships:

- Kaplan Foundation
- Zylofone Studios
- St. Luke's Cornwall Hospital
- LEGOLAND – New York

Community Partnerships

The BRIDGES program is successful because of the partnerships with political leaders, educational institutions, community organizations, businesses, and individuals who believed that they could make a significant difference and change the outlook/outcome for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. These partnerships have opened doors for students to practice pre-employment skills, made presentations to our classes regarding possible career opportunities, and have provided students with vocational internships.

Businesses (Shoprite, LEGOLAND, Bontura, Hudson Valley Credit Union, Times Herald Record) meet with the BRIDGES administration on a regular basis offering suggestions on improving vocational training, providing instruction and/or

opportunities for our students to practice “soft skills” related to employment.

Access to higher education/college experience is a right for all individuals. By partnering with such a diverse group, the BRIDGES program is able to offer students a comprehensive, well-rounded education that meets their individual needs. Students are given an opportunity to showcase their gifts and strengths and learn how to overcome the challenges they face. In addition, barriers to employment, independent living, and engagement in the community at large are being addressed.

Social Skills Development

The social skills component of the curriculum has clinical oversight by a neuropsychologist, Michelle A. Dunn, PhD. Key topics that are covered through-out the social skill curriculum are:

- Self Regulation
- How You Present Yourself to the World
- Social Communication
- Social Relationships
- Working with Others
- Adult Independent Living Skills

Each student is paired with a Peer Mentor (a volunteer from the general student body). The peer mentors reinforce learned

social skills in the natural environment as opportunities present themselves on the college campus. It is a major component to the success of the BRIDGES program.

Moving Forward....

It is our mission to empower our students to identify goals they would like to work on, help them structure a plan on how to achieve those goals, as well as support and guide them through any potential revisions or alterations to their plan. It is through this process that we support their development as strong self-advocates who will be able to negotiate their path forward with confidence.

As we move forward, we realize we have only begun to scratch the surface of the partnerships that will need to be made to continue to move our already successful program forward.

Access to a higher education and a meaningful college experience is still not available to many individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It is our hope that by sharing our program and its success we can continue to build upon our program but also encourage partnerships between other higher education institutions and communities to develop their own post-secondary educational programs for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Professional Staff

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