

Running Head: HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education...preparing for what?

Career, relationships and community life

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### **Higher Education...Preparing for What? Career, Relationships, and Community Life**

Post-Secondary education and training is an essential requirement for young adults with intellectual disabilities to become successful, independent members of our community.

Impressive gains in post-secondary outcomes have been made, but youth with intellectual disabilities continue to lag behind other youth with disabilities -- only 15% of youth in special education actually move into post-secondary options (National Longitudinal Transition Study – 2, 2011). History has taught us that there is a high probability that students with intellectual disabilities will move from segregated high school programs into segregated adult day programs or sheltered workshops.

In response to increasing requests of students and families there are now more youths with intellectual disabilities participating in college programs. As Getzel & Wehman (2005) artfully stated, pursuing a college education remains “The American Dream.” Up until now the transition to college for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities has been “the forgotten transition.”

There is an expansive body of research that demonstrates the significant benefits of inclusion for students in K–12th grades; inclusion in post-secondary education is the next step (Getzel, & Wehman, 2005; Giangreco & Doyle, 2007; Keefe, Moore, & Duff, 2006). In keeping with the TASH Resolution on Post Secondary Education (adopted May, 2006), “we envision postsecondary education as places of transformational learning and deep social change that invites the full participation of citizens with diverse experiences and ways of understanding in order to develop an appreciation for each individual’s contribution.” Additionally, IDEA 2004 states that students with disabilities are to be educated not only for future employment and independent community living but also for the prospect of continued life-long learning that is

results-oriented. Another recent development that promises to assist increasing numbers of students with intellectual disabilities to participate on college campuses is the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) 2008. This legislation authorizes colleges to create or expand high-quality inclusive post-secondary programs for students with intellectual disabilities. In support of this, HEOA addresses the financial burdens faced by all students in pursuit of a college education by including provisions related to the eligibility of students with intellectual disabilities to participate in the Federal Pell Grant, Federal Work Study and Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants programs.

Without the opportunity to partake of the broad spectrum of education learning options, these young people are squeezed into a very limited array of possibilities. There are formidable and practical reasons why these students should go to college. According to Grigal & Hart (2010) the experience of post-secondary education is comprised of a wide array of opportunities; some academic, some social, some cultural, and some employment. Having one's mind opened to learning affords students the opportunity to experience academic success, build self-esteem, forge relationships and a social life, make choices, gain independence, contribute to the community, and prepare for a career.

College is a place where diverse communities of people are "held" and supported. College is a place where our capacity to change the sociopolitical conditions in which we live is nourished. And finally, college depicts a deep democracy where everyone that represents the reality of community is present. We have witnessed a sense of justice arise from the work among the students, staff, mentors and faculty (Mindell, 1995).

What follows is the story of the partnership between AHRC New York City and The College of Staten Island and Kingsborough Community College, of the City University of New

York, in developing the Melissa Riggio Higher Education Program (MRHEP). Each college hosts a fully inclusive, three year post-secondary educational program that reflects all aspects of campus life. This includes: pursuing knowledge, investigating career goals, acquiring maturity through new experiences, gaining new responsibilities and ways of problem solving, exploring aspects of life by engaging in new personal and professional relationships, and learning collectively with each other. It is a non-matriculated, non-degree program for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities with an overall mission to help students clarify their career goals by providing them with a relevant course of study within the course offerings of the college, work internships, and in-depth life coaching, which leads to a certificate upon graduation and to employment.

The defining element of “The American Dream” is the successful pursuit of a career as a result of one’s education. It has been demonstrated that youth with intellectual disabilities who receive post-secondary education are more likely to be competitively employed and obtain higher earnings over time than their peers who do not have this experience (Gilmore, Bose, & Hart, 2001). There is a very meaningful and complicated relationship between all that college has to offer and employment. As in the metaphor of “The American Dream”, the defining element of the MRHEP, as seen in Figure 1 (Melissa Riggio Higher Education Program prototype to meaningful employment), is that each student has a successful college experience that results in employment in their field of study and interest. What happens “the day after graduation” and the transition to “career, relationships and community life” is the accountability for which the MRHEP staff is held.

## **Establish Student Vision and Goals**

The Council on Quality and Leadership (2010) defines what it means to be Person-Centered as:

Each person has a vision for what really matters that flows from a singular life history; a range of experiences and emotions; and unique dreams and goals. [Each person is provided with] unconditional acceptance and the support to live his or her own life – to plan, to contribute, to participate, to choose – and to be respected and valued. (p. 9)

MRHEP follows this approach beginning with the application process. During the initial interview prospective students and their families tour the campus, meet with current students and student mentors. A Person Centered Planning process (Mount, 1992; Mount, 2000) with prospective students and their families explores whose dream college is, why the student wants to go to college, what the future might look like, what works and does not work for the student, what field of study might hold interest, and most importantly, what supports and accommodations the student will need to succeed in college. Prospective students spend a few days on campus, participating in classes and social activities. Additionally, they submit an entrance project. This is a portfolio about oneself, which may contain music, photos, art, video, and/or writing samples. The portfolio helps MRHEP staff gain further insight into the individual who is applying. Thus begins the thread of person centered processes that governs all aspects of the MRHEP.

Once a student is accepted, a Circle of Support is created (Beeman, Ducharme, & Mount, 1989; Falvey, Forrest, Pearpoint, & Rosenberg, 2012). The student, family, program staff, college faculty, and other significant people in the student's life become aligned and partner to

explore the future and address current problems. For the Circle of Support the seminal question is always about “the day after graduation”; “What will Johnny be doing when he graduates?”; and “What is the bigger picture of Johnny’s life?” Although this is the question that no college student really wants to address, it is the question of pivotal importance for the student with intellectual disabilities.

### **Develop Flexible Supports**

College is an “easement” on the journey to adulthood. It is a journey in which we confront many questions as we search for answers. One question calls upon the enabling factors that support this journey. Some of the answers focus on being organized, having a social life and establishing social boundaries, managing one’s money, traveling independently, having a healthy life style, finding one’s voice and advocating for oneself, having unpaid and paid internships, etc. This is an inexhaustible list. The college campus presents rich and varied opportunities for student participation in recreational, social, cultural, and civic activities. The program staff and campus mentors facilitate participation in these opportunities in accordance with the students’ interest and preferences. We have learned that the single “enabling” factor is the provision of flexible supports through the student mentors. Mentors are supports, or “guides”, officially enrolled at the college (matriculated), who are considered to be students in good standing. Some mentors are paid, others are using this experience as part of an independent study and still others use it to fulfill college requirements for civic engagement. By employing matriculated students as mentors we are contributing to each college’s mission to build “good citizens” and develop their “real wealth” (Duffy, 2011). These mentors are students who demonstrate personal resilience, a spirit which enables them to see and use four capacities: relationships, personal strengths/gifts, resources, and community (Duffy, 2011; Newman, 2009). Mentors and MRHEP

staff must, in turn, be nurtured and educated. We have learned that there is both “art” and “science” in matching and sustaining relationships between students and mentors. Simon Duffy (2011) articulated the “creed” that the mentor relationship draws its strength from: the emphasis is on the person, the nature of the relationship is equal and productive and there is a clear commitment to positive outcomes and citizenship.

### **Support Students on the Path to Meaningful Career Outcomes**

MRHEP students participate in a full college course load that includes regular classes, internships, study groups, clubs and other campus activities. Students’ schedules are individualized, based on their interests and strengths, available courses, off campus opportunities, and campus activities of interest.

At the end of each semester, the Circle of Support meets to evaluate what worked, what didn’t work and what the student wants to pursue for the next semester. Students are encouraged to make academic choices relevant to their career goals. This can be challenging because students’ dreams change. The students, with the support of their circle, choose from the classes offered for the next semester. At this point MRHEP staff approach each professor who is teaching one of these courses to discuss the possibility of a seat for the student and their mentor in the class. Building relationships with college faculty is critical to the success of the MRHEP model. Students take two to three classes per semester. All MRHEP students are required to take the core course work that all incoming freshmen students do. We have seen that as students gain skills and form relationships they become more comfortable and actively participate in college life.

After completing two academic semesters, each student is required to participate in an on-campus internship program. We strive to develop internships that support a student’s

individual goals and interests. For example, a student who wants to work with children may work at the campus daycare center; when a student is interested in sports, they may intern in the gym or with an intramural team; if a student sees oneself an aspiring writer, they may intern for the college newspaper. The list goes on.

Once a student successfully completes on-campus internships, they transition to a community based internship, where they can further build their employment skills and resume. For example, a student who likes gardening can get an internship with a local florist, in the botanical gardens or with a landscape company; a student who wants to pursue a career in film making can get an internship with a local independent film maker, a museum, a civic arts center, or at a politician's office where there is a film crew. Student mentors are always present, supporting students in their internships both on and off campus. The student mentor's role is not limited to assisting a student to complete a task but they act as a "social guide", facilitating relationships and building bridges within the community.

MRHEP students constitute a learning community (Bos-Ciussi, Augier, & Rosner, 2008), as they share common emotions, values and beliefs. They are actively engaged in learning together from each other. Such communities have become the template for a cohort-based higher education experience. In addition to their college coursework, students take MRHEP supportive coursework to enhance their use of technology, self-advocacy skills, abuse prevention, travel training, money management, healthy lifestyle choices, etc. These courses are developed and taught by MRHEP staff.

During the final year the emphasis is on job development. The Circle of Support may expand to include representatives from supported employment providers and representatives from the State Vocational Rehabilitation Agency. During this meeting an employment plan is



developed. It addresses preferences, contributions, and conditions for employment, types of jobs, employment leads and relationships with people who may know or may become possible employers (Mast, Shumpert, & Callahan, 2003). There is a focus on exploring the networks that family members have. The networks that have been developed through the on-campus and community internships and those of faculty who have worked closely with the students become a rich source of leads to possible employment. The journey that these three steps take us through: establishing the student's vision and goals, developing flexible supports, and supporting students in creating a path to employment constitute the core of the MRHEP. This is illustrated in Figure 2 (A Student's Journey: Mary's Story) and Figure 3 (MELISSA RIGGIO HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAM: Program Assets).

### **Implement Ongoing Services and Supports.**

At this point we face yet another transition, graduation from college, beginning employment and putting together a life. The road to adulthood is a bumpy one and what we do when we implement ongoing supports is to provide the graduate and their family with a "shock absorber." What does this look like? For a year after graduation MRHEP offers the opportunity to their graduates to become part of the Alumni Program. This is funded through the New York State Home and Community Based Waiver (HCBW). Graduates continue expanding their repertoire of skills through volunteer or unpaid internships. They also have the opportunity to take continuing education classes at college or in the local community center. They learn how to network by building bridges in their community by joining the local community center, finding recreational opportunities and clubs to join.

Alumni go on job interviews which means resume preparation, rehearsing for an interview, learning how to network and follow-up after an interview, as well as managing

expectations and rejection. During this year graduates learn to self-reflect, make decisions, take risks, and manage consequences differently than they did when they were in college. MRHEP staff plays a different role in the way that they support these graduates. MRHEP staff is now responsible for both the coordination of services and the enhanced use of natural supports at the workplace, in the community, and at home. “Natural supports” is a code for the fact that the quality of one’s life is rooted in relationships. Relationships will create opportunities and promote independence through respect, choice and contribution.

### **Outcomes**

Each MRHEP graduate has developed a vision for what really matters to them and which flows from their range of experiences and emotions during their three years in college. During the college journey, MRHEP staff has learned to suspend judgment because that is what opens up a world of possibilities for them (Laurie Kelly, Personal Communication, March 9, 2012). MRHEP staff provides each person with unconditional acceptance and the support to live their own life.

For the sake of clarity we are going to separate the discussion of “employment outcomes” and “true outcomes”. Yes, employment means obtaining a job and all the secondary effects that employment may bring to one, i.e. money in the bank, respect, colleagues, vacations, supervisors, deadlines, etc. When we talk about “true outcomes” we are addressing developing a sense of self both at the workplace and in the community. It means being a full member of the team, making new friends and not becoming isolated at work, and finally, becoming a full citizen. A full citizen is someone who is respected and valued, and has the benefits of an “ordinary life”...home, money, work, friends, intimacy, family, eating together, helping others,

and having fun, etc. The goal of higher education is to equip people to become a full citizen. In conclusion, in 2010, Madeline Will stated

that postsecondary education is the most important key to shaping a new reality for people with disabilities. It has the exciting potential to create a future based not on low expectations, the can'ts and shouldn'ts, but on the high expectations of productivity and personal and economic freedom. Postsecondary education has the potential to fundamentally alter perceptions of people with intellectual disabilities as the competent as the competent, capable and productive citizens we know them to be (p. xii).

This constitutes the epitome of the values and the vision of the Melissa Riggio Higher Education Program.

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**1. Establish Student Vision and Goals**

- Choosing the right college
- Creating a Circle of Support
- Building partnerships with families
- Conducting Person Centered Planning
- Developing a PATH to employment

**2. Develop Flexible Supports**

- Recruiting student mentors through paid employment, internships, independent studies, civic engagement
- Determining the level of support that students need
- Matching students with mentors

**3. Support Students in Creating a Path to Meaningful Career Outcomes**

- Registering for classes
- Learning Communities
- On and off campus internships
- Career planning and development

**4. Implement Ongoing Services and Supports**

- Coordinating supports
- Alumni Services
- Fostering natural supports

**5. Outcomes**

- Paid employment
- Relationships and community life
- Citizenship

*Figure 1.* Melissa Riggio Higher Education Program prototype to meaningful employment (adapted from Hart, Zimbrich, & Parker, 2005, p.260).

GOAL	CLASSES	INTERNSHIPS	EMPLOYMENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1st year: I want to work in childcare</li> <li>• 2nd year: I want to work with children or in a bookstore</li> </ul>	<p><u>COLLEGE CLASSES</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intro to College Life</li> <li>• Career Development</li> <li>• Developmental Literacy 1</li> <li>• Developmental Literacy 2</li> <li>• Student Development</li> <li>• Fluency Reading and Writing</li> <li>• Basic Computer</li> <li>• Ceramics</li> <li>• Photography</li> <li>• Walk, Jog, Run</li> <li>• Yoga</li> <li>• Stress Management</li> <li>• Women's in American History</li> </ul> <p><u>MRHEP Supportive Coursework</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploring Identity</li> <li>• Personal Exploration</li> <li>• Human Sexuality</li> <li>• Abuse Prevention: ESCAPE (Khemka, Hickson, Golden, &amp; Chatzistyli, 2005)</li> <li>• Assistive Technology</li> <li>• Self-Directed Employment</li> <li>• Teach with Movies</li> </ul>	<p><u>ON-CAMPUS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Campus bookstore</li> <li>• Campus Day Care Center</li> </ul> <p><u>OFF-CAMPUS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading to children in the hospital</li> <li>• Brooklyn Children's Museum Gift Shop</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barnes &amp; Noble</li> </ul> <p>Job description: public relations, author signings, school trip tours, reading to children</p>

Figure 2. A Student's Journey: Mary's Story



COLLEGE CLASSES	MRHEP SUPPORTIVE COURSEWORK	INTERNSHIPS	EMPLOYMENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acting</li> <li>• Astronomy</li> <li>• Baking</li> <li>• Body Building</li> <li>• Career Development</li> <li>• Ceramics</li> <li>• Contemporary Black Literature</li> <li>• Developmental Literacy</li> <li>• Film and Society</li> <li>• Film Genre</li> <li>• Geology</li> <li>• History</li> <li>• Intro to College Life</li> <li>• Intro to Culinary Arts</li> <li>• Intro to Film</li> <li>• Intro to Modern Sculpture</li> <li>• Intro to Visual Arts</li> <li>• Jazz History</li> <li>• Listening and Speaking</li> <li>• Marketing</li> <li>• Media Planning</li> <li>• Modern Dance</li> <li>• Music Experience</li> <li>• Stress Management</li> <li>• Tennis</li> <li>• Volleyball</li> <li>• Women in American History</li> <li>• Yoga</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abuse Prevention: ESCAPE-DD (Khemka, et.al., 2005)</li> <li>• Assistive Technology</li> <li>• Be Happy Be Healthy</li> <li>• Exploring Identity</li> <li>• Healthy Living</li> <li>• Human Sexuality</li> <li>• Personal Exploration</li> <li>• Self-directed Employment</li> <li>• Skills to Pay the Bills</li> <li>• Teach with Movies</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>ON-CAMPUS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art Gallery</li> <li>• Baseball Team Assistant</li> <li>• Cafeteria</li> <li>• Catering Office</li> <li>• Childcare Center</li> <li>• College Bookstore</li> <li>• College Newspaper</li> <li>• Faculty Offices</li> <li>• Library</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>OFF-CAMPUS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Animal Care</li> <li>• Café</li> <li>• Comic Book Store</li> <li>• Community Arts Center</li> <li>• Data Entry</li> <li>• Dog Walking</li> <li>• Food Pantries</li> <li>• Food Preparation</li> <li>• Museums</li> <li>• Music Studio</li> <li>• Muslim Family Center</li> <li>• Non-profit Office</li> <li>• Nursing Homes</li> <li>• Office Work</li> <li>• Pre-School</li> <li>• Public Library</li> <li>• Senior Center</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AHRC NYC Film Crew</li> <li>• Barclays Center Food Service</li> <li>• Barnes &amp; Noble Public Relations</li> <li>• Board of Elections</li> <li>• Borough President's Office Film Crew</li> <li>• Brooklyn Courthouse Clerical</li> <li>• College Basketball Team</li> <li>• College Bookstore Clerk</li> <li>• College Cafeteria Catering</li> <li>• Council For the Arts</li> <li>• Music Store: strings guitars</li> <li>• Old Navy</li> <li>• Pet Smart</li> <li>• Pizzeria Chef</li> <li>• Real Estate</li> <li>• Retail Clothing</li> <li>• Summer Camp Chef</li> <li>• Supermarket Chef at Deli Counter</li> <li>• TGI Fridays Chef</li> <li>• Yankee Stadium Food Service</li> <li>• YMCA Childcare</li> </ul>

Figure 3. MELISSA RIGGIO HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAM: Program Assets