



LEAP at FCC opens the door of higher education for students with developmental disabilities.

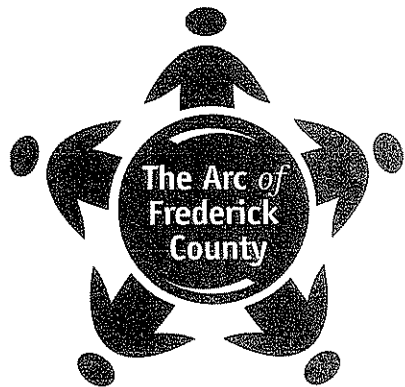
Taking the Plunge into College

By Aaron Notarianni Stephens

It was not that long ago in our American history that students with intellectual and other developmental disabilities were often denied access to a public education. In 1975, Congress enacted what became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to support states and localities in protecting the rights of and meeting the needs of students with disabilities. A generation of students has grown up with the right to be included in their neighborhood elementary, middle and high schools.

The Arc of Frederick County has been an ally to families and a partner with Frederick County Public Schools to promote and advocate for inclusive education for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Historically, most attention has focused on supporting students through their high school years. However, a growing number of students with disabilities, both locally and nationally, are looking toward opportunities of higher learning as a path that enhances their career skills, makes them more competitive in the workforce, and promotes life-long learning.

EDUCATIONAL ADVOCACY



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HIGHLIGHTS OF LEAP AT FCC:

- LEAP is taught by an FCC Adjunct Professor of Psychology.
- Traditional FCC students attend classes to support an inclusive learning environment.
- Each student goes through the FCC registration process and receives a college ID.
- Students receive a voucher for the book store to purchase items.
- Students eat lunch in the Cougar Cafe and participate in campus activities.
- Students who have completed LEAP have also taken other enrichment and credit classes.
- LEAP is a collaborative project between The Arc of Frederick County, Frederick Community College and Frederick County Public Schools.

To open the doors of higher education to students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in our community, The Arc of Frederick County, Frederick Community College and Frederick County Public Schools have collaborated to offer the Leadership, Enrichment, Achievement Program at Frederick Community College (LEAP at FCC).

THE LEAP

LEAP at FCC is a personal growth and enrichment class for students ages 18 to 22 with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The course introduces students with developmental disabilities to both the academic and social aspects of college. It is a goal of the class to assist students with becoming familiar with college classes and campus life so they will be more confident to enroll in other courses and take part in campus activities.

Erick Williams, an adjunct professor of psychology, teaches LEAP at FCC. He has taught the class since the spring semester of 2008. Erick has worked closely with The Arc to design

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a course that introduces the college experience to students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. His lessons focus on supporting students to identify positive habits and how to apply those habits to the workforce, post-secondary education and the adult world.

"This is the most joyful work I have ever done," Erick says when reflecting on his experience teaching LEAP at FCC.

The students in the class are a diverse group and include individuals with intellectual disabilities, autism and physical limitations, among other developmental disabilities. Teaching the class "can be challenging because there is such diversity in skill levels among the students," Erick says. "These students often circumvent intellectual limitations through creativity."

Erick and The Arc work with various departments at FCC to recruit traditional students to participate in the class. The traditional students provide classroom assistance to the students with disabilities and promote inclusive learning. They also support LEAP participants to make social connections on the college campus.

STUDENT PROFILE

Kurtis Dennis is a past LEAP at FCC participant who used the class as a springboard to enroll in other courses on the college campus. Kurtis, who is diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, an au-

tism spectrum disorder, graduated from Tuscarora High School in June 2009.

"College is a must in my family," he says.

After years of building upon an inclusive education within Frederick County Public Schools, it was time for Kurtis to put all he learned to the test and apply his skills and education to the world of higher learning.

"LEAP was real interesting and I enjoyed it," Kurtis says of his first class on the Frederick Community College campus in the fall of 2007. "LEAP helped me get used to the college campus."

Since graduating from high school, Kurtis has successfully completed two FCC courses and is enrolled in two courses this semester. "Officially, my major is general studies, but I am leaning toward changing it to ASL (American Sign Language)," Kurtis says.

Kurtis has been employed with Toys R Us for a year. He wanted to learn sign language to equip him with skills to be more competitive in the Frederick workforce and to be helpful to customers who are deaf.

"I've gotten to use sign language a couple of times with my customers," he says.

Kurtis accesses support at FCC from the college's Office of Services for Students with Disabilities. Students with appropriate documentation are eligible for reasonable accommodations as described in the Rehabilitative Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act and amendments. If eligible, an accommodation plan is developed

to address specific courses in which a student is enrolled. Resources are individualized to meet the needs of the student and can include things such as academic advising, assistive technology and tutoring.

"My plan includes using a digital recorder in class, extended test taking time, and I go to the Getting Connected Club on Wednesday mornings," Kurtis says.

The Getting Connected Club is coordinated through the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities and supports students to become more familiar with the college campus and campus life.

NATIONAL RECOGNITION

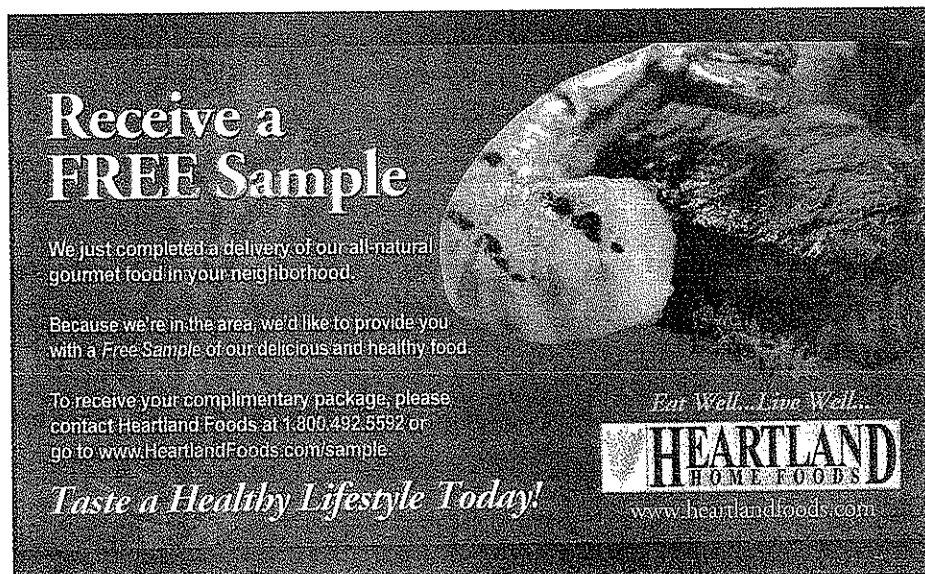
The Arc, FCC, and Frederick County Public Schools' joint collaboration has been recognized nationally for its innovative success. In April 2010, The Arc of Frederick County was awarded a sub-grant through The Arc of The United States and the Walmart Foundation School-to-Community Transition Project to expand LEAP at FCC and other opportunities of higher learning on the college campus. The Arc of Frederick County was one of 45 local chapters of The Arc across the United States to be selected as a sub-grant recipient.

Expansion of the project includes offering LEAP at FCC during the spring, summer and fall semesters and assisting students to enroll in courses already offered on the college campus. Additionally, current FCC courses will be evaluated to design customized courses that are accessible to students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The first customized course to be offered will focus on teaching and enhancing interviewing skills.

Outcomes of the project will be shared with other communities as an example of how to create and sustain opportunities of higher learning for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

For more information about LEAP at FCC, please contact Aaron Stephens at 301-663-0909, extension 26, or astephens@arcfc.org.

Aaron Stephens is the assistant director of The Arc of Frederick County.



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