

Bridge

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It's not a question of intelligence. It's regular life they have difficulty with — getting up in the morning, prioritizing tasks, and taking care of themselves. Autism affects executive functioning, the brain's ability to process the overwhelming surge of information that streams through our lives every moment. They have trouble interpreting events and social cues, and formulating an appropriate response.

"More and more I saw a problem that repeats itself," says Miller, who came to Berkeley from Menlo College's disability services department. "There's a semester, perhaps a year, where they tried it the traditional way. Socially, they couldn't do it. You don't have the advocacy of an IEP team."

And a heart-rending cycle begins. Conventional college is a disaster, so the teen lands back at home, trying to take classes at a community college, and becoming ever more socially isolated. Instead of moving forward, he goes backward.

That was the fear for Jason Kanar and his family. Kanar had spent two years as a mechanical engineering major at UC Merced, trying to tough it out.

"By fourth semester," he says, "we realized we had to do something else."

There was nothing wrong with Kanar's intellect. It was everything else that was the problem.

"It's not so much needing help with subjects, it's just getting started," he says. "If I don't explicitly put out time for certain things, it doesn't happen. It's about doing it all, the cooking, the cleaning, the being on time for class."

Back home in the Danville area, Kanar's family began researching other options, alternatives that would bridge the gap between the protected, special-education environment of high school and the challenges of university life. Frankly, there just aren't many.

In the waning weeks of last summer, as Kanar tried to hold down a job at a Target store and figure out his life, his parents chanced upon this new program in Berkeley, the latest incarnation in psychologist Michael McManmon's 25-year-old vision of college internship

College Internship Program

This postsecondary program offers academic, internship and independent living experiences — including housing and classes in downtown Berkeley — for college-age youths with Asperger's syndrome, high-functioning autism, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and other learning differences. CIP also offers a summer program for high school students on the UC Berkeley campus.

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programs, which started in Massachusetts.

The inside joke is that the Berkeley site was chosen for its alphabetical appeal — the other programs are at the Berkshire center in Massachusetts, the Brevard Center in Florida, and the Bloomington Center in Indiana.

But in truth, Miller says, Berkeley's combination of academics and city life, its public transit system, and the soaring statistics on autistic spectrum disorder cases on the West Coast made it a good fit.

In California, some 1,977 youths, ages 14 to 21, with autistic spectrum diagnoses were enrolled in public schools in 2000. By 2008, the number had risen to 11,816.

"The need has been endless," she says, "but there was nowhere to go."

Now the program has expanded to include a summer session for high school students with Asperger's on the UC Berkeley campus, as well as the orientation program for incoming first-year students that starts in mid-July.

Some of the program's students are like Kanar, Bay Area born and bred. Others have traveled a considerable distance, physically and emotionally, to arrive here.

"I came here in complete denial," Meeuwssen confesses.

That denial evaporated when she came across an Asperger's symptom checklist and found herself uttering a surprised "Oh!" at every question. Suddenly, there was an explanation for her difficulties and, more important, help.

"Definitely, the fact that there's been

a name for it has been the most helpful," she says. "I was so isolated in high school. I've come so fully out of my shell. I'm an honor student, the president of the student senate here."

Kanar, Meeuwssen and their classmates spend much of their days together. Students share two-bedroom apartments in downtown Berkeley, cook cooperatively and attend morning classes together.

Each day starts with a reframing exercise, and a series of questions — Am I hungry, tired, angry, depressed, anxious? — that serves as a sensory check-in. Students grade themselves in each area and discuss how they might cope by getting more sleep, eating a better breakfast or being more gentle and forgiving with themselves.

There are tutoring sessions, social peer counseling, and career and executive functioning classes, none of which carry a small price tag, not with a staff-student ratio of one to one.* About 95 percent of the California students' tuition is covered by Regional Center funding — the same funding that helped cover their special education costs in high school.

For actual classwork they head off to lecture halls at Berkeley City College, Holy Names, Peralta College and other campuses in the area.

Meeuwssen takes an online European history class and a psychology class at Berkeley City College, and volunteers at Alta Bates hospital. Kanar is studying multivariable calculus, English and sound design.

On weekends, they strike out with friends to other areas — Point Reyes, for example, or the tea garden in Golden Gate Park. Sundays are "Grill and Chill Nights," when students fire up the barbecue and hang out.

"They haven't had much of this sort of thing," says CIP marketing coordinator Dan McManmon, "this big group of friends."

And the difference it makes in a young adult's life can be profound, he says. It's not just about academic success, or modern survival skills. It's about learning to thrive independently.

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* Regional center funding statistics have changed