



## NEW YEAR, NEW BEGINNINGS

ENHANCE at Ramapo College of New Jersey proudly welcomed 10 students to campus this September, with two returning students and eight new students participating in the program. All ENHANCE students and their families were invited to attend a Welcome Reception on August 31st, prior to the start of the semester. In attendance from the college were staff members from Counseling Services and the Office of Specialized Services, as well as the ENHANCE Peer Mentors. After brunch and introductions were made, ENHANCE students had a chance to tour campus with their Peer Mentors who pointed out classroom locations and other important “hot spots” on campus. In addition, students living on campus were given a chance to drop their belongings off early and meet their R.A.’s before the rush of Move-In Day.

### Making Connections

One of the hallmarks of the ENHANCE program is the weekly Connections meeting which is a therapeutic group co-facilitated by the offices of Counseling Services and OSS. Over pizza and soda, students are encouraged to share some of the challenges and real-life issues they face as college students with ASD, with the facilitators guiding them in problem-solving techniques and meaningful discussions. For example, one of the topics that engaged students this semester was how ASD is portrayed in the media with students each providing feedback on their perceptions. Students are encouraged to “lead the discussion” by bringing up topics for the group to examine.

### PEER MENTOR SPOTLIGHT

*“I like to do what interests them, whether it be sitting and talking, playing Smash Brothers on the WiiU or just walking around campus and seeing where the day takes us!”*

Meet Eileen Camilo, class of 2020, a nursing/social work major. This is Eileen’s second year as an ENHANCE peer mentor. When asked why she volunteered for this position, Eileen said that she wanted to learn more about the autism community and help create an environment where these students are involved at Ramapo without stigma attached.

**The Social Scene** If you hear laughter emanating from one of the classrooms, it just might be some ENHANCE students and their mentors at a weekly social get together where they talk, relax and do a fun activity. One week you might find a game of Apples to Apples going on, another it might be charades and more recently, as finals approached, the group made some stress balls from balloons and flour. ENHANCE students are encouraged to come up with activities and all ideas and suggestions are welcome!

# ENHANCE GIVES STUDENTS AN ADDED BOOST

Entering college can be a challenge for most students. But for those who are on the spectrum, a college environment can often present a unique set of hurdles.

Ramapo College's new ENHANCE program is designed to help students with ASD to transition successfully from high school to college. Another goal is to keep current students academically and socially engaged so they can fully enjoy their college experience.

"ENHANCE was created because the number of Ramapo students who identified as having ASD has increased by more than 800 percent over the past seven years," says Suzanne Calgi, a psychological counselor and coordinator for ENHANCE. "And while many of these students excel academically, they often have a deficit in social communication."



A therapeutic support program, ENHANCE's holistic approach focuses on social, emotional, and organization growth to assist students on the spectrum to adapt and flourish in college and beyond.

"We individualize the program to meet each student's needs," explains Calgi. "I am a therapist. It is through talking to students and getting their stories that I begin to understand if they are suffering from anxiety, or having difficulty communicating with people. I also discover what has kept them from achieving in the past and what keeps them from making friends. Then I hone in on those issues and help to resolve them."

Each student has a weekly appointment with Calgi to discuss their needs and work on individualized goals. If needed, a student may request additional weekly sessions.

"Parent contact is a part of our program," she adds. "I encourage my students to sign a release that will allow me

to speak to their parents and most students do sign the release."

Calgi also facilitates group meetings for students with the College's Office of Specialized Services. "At those meetings we ask students for topics they are interested in discussing and that are relevant to them such as friendships, dating, social media, texting, college stress, life stress, effective communication with college personnel, life skills and independence," she says. "Through these meetings the students get support not only from us but also from each other."

Another unique components of the program is its peer mentors, undergraduates who volunteer to work with ENHANCE students. "The goal of the peer mentors is to help ENHANCE students to integrate into the campus," says Calgi.

She trains peer mentors on the basics of the autism spectrum, what things to look for, what issues might come up, and she makes sure they understand that each student is unique. "The peer mentors receive four hours of training before they meet their peers, and then we have a weekly meeting where we discuss what is happening with the students. If an issue arises, mentors know that they can call me anytime."

A peer mentors will then meet with their ENHANCE student several times each week to eat lunch or just relax at one of the student gathering spots.

"We've noticed that our students tend to be very good academically, but the social aspects of campus life might be more difficult for them, so the often isolate themselves," says Calgi. "A peer mentor can often ease a student entry into the larger student community."

Peer mentors also introduce ENHANCE students to the various student organizations and if necessary will accompany them to a meeting. They create a bridge to campus activities and help the students to connect with other club members. Peers also plan and lead weekend social events. In addition, they review the campus events lists, select the ones that might appeal to ENHANCE students, and offer to accompany them to those events.

"ENHANCE is in line with Ramapo's strategic goal of creating a supportive environment for all, with particular consideration for underrepresented groups and we do consider students with disabilities to be underrepresented," says Calgi. "I see ENHANCE expanding in the coming years."

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**For more information about the ENHANCE program, visit our website [www.ramapo.edu/enhance](http://www.ramapo.edu/enhance) , email [enhance@ramapo.edu](mailto:enhance@ramapo.edu) or contact Suzanne Calgi at 201-684-7522**