BY BRIAN DETLEFSEN

How often do students with autism and related behavioral challenges get to experience a college campus before they leave the safety net of high school? How often do pre-service college students studying education get to experience the students they will one day work with outside of the classroom walls before fully committing to the profession?

The answer to both questions is “not very often.” The solution to both is partnerships between schools that serve students on the autism spectrum and local colleges. The Forum School, a New Jersey state-approved private school located in Bergen County, and Ramapo College have formed such a partnership, and it has been a win-win situation for all involved.

The Forum School, founded in 1954 by a group of parents who could not find appropriate placements in public schools to address their children’s specific needs, has always believed in extending learning beyond the walls of the classroom. It has been a cornerstone of the program since its inception, providing instruction in the local community before Community-Based Instruction was chic. Since expanding their program to serve students through age 21 in 2012, they have developed a Structured Learning Experience Program with ties to over forty businesses in the local community.

The vocational component of their unique transition program was flourishing, but leaders at The Forum School wanted to enhance the social experiences of their young adults even more.

Enter Dr. Julie Norflus-Good, Director of the Master of Arts in Special Education Program and a Professor at Ramapo College of New Jersey, located in Mahwah. Dr. Norflus-Good approached educators at The Forum School with a vision for a program in which her pre-service undergraduate students gained hands-on experience in working with young adults outside of the classroom, and young adults with developmental disabilities gained the experience of being on a college campus in a social setting with their non-disabled peers.

A symbiotic relationship was born! Dr. Norflus-Good collaborated with Vicki Ofmani, Supervisor of Instruction and SLE Coordinator at The Forum School, to create a partnership that was mutually beneficial for all involved.

Once a week, students on the autism spectrum aged 18-21 in The Forum School’s E.L.I.T.E. Program (Education Leading Individuals Towards Employment) travel to Ramapo College to interact with Dr. Norflus-Good’s undergraduate education major students on academic tasks and experiential learning projects. Even more important than the work, is the opportunity for The Forum School’s
young adults with developmental disabilities to socialize with the college students in the campus setting and to navigate the grounds, the college buildings, and the cafeteria. Many students would never have the opportunity to see what college is like - their experiences limited to visiting campuses of their siblings and other relatives. But with more and more colleges creating support programs for those on the spectrum, there are real possibilities for The Forum School's students to attend college, and this relationship gives them their first taste of college life.

On the flip side, at 18 years old, it is really difficult for college freshman to determine what career path they want to take. The experience the undergrads gain in interacting with and learning to understand the needs of young adults with developmental disabilities is priceless. Based on a recent student feedback survey Dr. Norflus-Good distributed, this opportunity has helped some students decide they made the right choice in choosing to pursue a career in special education, and for others it helps them realize it is not for them.

Dr. Norflus-Good believes this cutting edge partnership is helping her students.

"Today's classrooms are diverse, and I believe all students need as much hands-on learning as they can get. It truly is an amazing collaboration," she stated.

When asked on a recent survey how they felt the program benefited them, one of Dr. Norflus-Good's students commented, "I became a more compassionate and accepting person... I absolutely loved it and was honored I was able to experience this."

And, of course, there is the cafeteria. Food is a big motivator for any young adult and The Forum School's students do not miss out. After the "learning" is done, students head to the cafeteria to eat lunch with their peers, just like typical students do. The natural and unstructured social opportunities the program presents simply cannot be re-created. The ability to engage with the undergrads socially provides a huge self-esteem boost to many of the students, leaving The Forum School's students a little prouder of their accomplishments with their heads held higher.

"I have observed a distinct improvement in their behavior and their ability to interact with others while participating in the program, as they make an effort to model their Ramapo College peers," said veteran teacher Beverly Asinofsky. "It is nice to take a step back and see the students come out of their shells."

Opportunities for cross-curricular learning are endless on the college campus. While students are working on academics and service projects, their social skills and ability to relate to those around them is constantly improving. It is also a terrific opportunity for travel training, as they learn to navigate a college campus.

While on campus, students are still supervised and guided by teachers and assistants from The Forum School, and Dr. Norflus-Good oversees the interactions of her students. The feedback from all has been amazing.

The program continues to develop. Separately funded through parent donations, Dr. Norflus-Good and Mrs. Ofmani have been able to expand the program to provide after-school opportunities where The Forum School's young adults visit the campus and interact with Dr. Norflus-Good's graduate students. Again, a win-win all around.

When asked about the program recently, Barb Russell, whose son has attended The Forum School since 2011, said, "I've seen language that we didn't have before. It's picking up small cues for social interaction. He's able to tell me some of the activities the students at Ramapo have for them. I think the Program is beneficial to all involved.

Many of these students struggle significantly with language, but they are going home and sharing information about their day with their families. It's amazing to see!

The Forum School students also view this as a positive experience. When asked to share his thoughts on the program, Tommy Frankel, a student since 2009, said "My favorite part is being with the college students and doing activities. I like just talking to them. We talk about our lives."

Ms. Ofmani sums up the sentiment of many when she talks about the partnership. "The bond that The Forum School has forged with Ramapo College through the leadership of Dr. Norflus-Good is remarkable. What began as a potential Structured Learning Experience for The Forum School's students has turned into so much more: hands-on experience for new teachers, typical peer interactions for our students, and education 'outside the box'. This relationship holds a promise of even further program development. I am in awe!"

This partnership offers a model for providing innovative services and experiences to young adults on the autism spectrum that take them beyond the classroom. When the bar is raised, students jump over it every time and prove that their potential is endless.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Brian Detlefsen has been in the field of special education for more than 20 years. He is the Principal of The Forum School.