

A Different Kind of College TOUR

Transition Opportunities at the University of Rochester—or TOUR—joins young adults with disabilities with traditional undergraduates in a common experience of college.

By Jim Mandelaro

The course is *Godzilla: Atomic Creatures*. Spenser McGuckin sits with 15 undergraduates as Joanne Bernardi, an associate professor of Japanese and of film and media studies, discusses cult movies featuring the mythical Japanese sea monster.

Wearing a blue Rochester hoodie, orange shorts, and neon Nike Hyperdunk sneakers, McGuckin fits right in. The 19-year-old is auditing the class as a second-year participant in the University's TOUR program.

TOUR stands for Transition Opportunities at the University of Rochester. It's a program for young adults of ages 18 to 21 with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In addition to participating in college courses, the students are immersed in vocational training, internships, transition and independent living education, and social activities on and off campus.

The program's long-term goals are competitive employment, an increased sense of community, and improved life skills.

"When I first came here, I was scared and nervous," says McGuckin, who is on the autism spectrum. "But I got over it quickly."

The 2015 graduate of Pittsford Mendon High School, about 10 miles southeast of the University, has enjoyed the full college experience at Rochester. While on the River Campus, he eats lunch in the dining halls and studies at Rush Rhees Library. During the 2015–16 academic year, he took an introductory geology course and an art history class. By spring, the once-shy teenager was giving campus tours to other prospective TOUR members. He also was playing lacrosse, a sport he had never tried before, as a way to make friends.

CELEBRATING SCHOOL: Zachary Arnold '17 (second from right) joined TOUR students Aaron Hewitt, Anthony Rutigliano, and Tyler Julien at an event honoring this spring's TOUR class.





It's long been recognized that college is a developmental experience, in addition to an academic and preprofessional one. "When people come to college, their main objective is to engage in academic and cocurricular experiences that help them develop the skills and knowledge to get a better job, succeed in life, and develop a career path," says Catherine Lewis, associate director of School and Community Relations in the Office of Admissions. "That's the same for TOUR students."

TOUR is a partnership that joins three separate entities, each with distinct roles. The Rochester Center for Community Leadership—located on the River Campus and part of Arts, Sciences & Engineering—coordinates academic access and peer mentorship support for TOUR students and serves as liaison between TOUR and University faculty members. Monroe One BOCES—part of the Board of Cooperative Educational Services, a state program created in 1948—collaborates with the University to help meet some of the unique needs of TOUR participants. And the Institute for Innovative Transition—created in 2008 through a partnership between the University and the B. Thomas Golisano Foundation—plays a lead role in developing inclusive educational experiences that meet the needs of teens and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities as they transition out of high school.

"Our goal is to raise awareness about the issues related to students with disabilities who are moving from school into college, employment, and life," says Martha Mock, director of the institute and an associate professor at the Warner School of Education, where the institute is located.

The institute serves a statewide population and has received more than \$2 million from the Golisano Foundation and \$7.5 million in federal and state grants since its inception. In 2010, a five-year, \$2.5 million Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities grant from the US Department of Education helped fund TOUR as well as similar programs at other colleges and



CLASS TIME: "I've gained independence and manage my time better," says TOUR student Kayla Hawkins, who worked with Monroe County special education teacher Christine Walker (above) during a class at Meliora Hall (opposite) this spring.







universities, including Keuka College, Roberts Wesleyan College, and Monroe Community College.

The grant was “a game changer for us,” says JoAnn Genthner, executive principal of Monroe One BOCES. “In the fall of 2013, we had no TOUR students taking courses. By the fall of 2015, we had over 20.”

Meg Grigal is a national expert on inclusive higher education and transition for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. She’s also principal investigator for multiple research grants at Think College!, a national organization based at the University of Massachusetts–Boston.

Grigal says Rochester’s TOUR program sets the standard for other colleges to follow. “It demonstrates what can happen when you pair high expectations with opportunity,” she says. “It provides a chance for students who are typically excluded from higher learning the opportunity to access courses related to their career or personal interest, engage in campus activities with other college students, and establish foundational employment experiences.”

And, she adds, “it reflects that the University of Rochester recog-

TAKING THE TOUR: As part of his participation in the program, Spenser McGuckin, a 19-year-old from Pittsford, New York, audited classes—above, with his academic coach, Khusbu Modi '19, a biomedical engineering major—and joined the club lacrosse team (opposite).

nizes that being responsive to a diverse group of learners is a part of the mission of higher education.”

During the 2016–17 academic year, 25 participants—18 men and 7 women—were enrolled in TOUR. The students are referred to the program by their local school districts, which also pick up costs associated with the students’ participation.

For many TOUR students, weekdays start at 8 a.m. in Meliora 221, where BOCES special education teachers Amy McCarthy and Christine Walker teach them independent living, social, and life skills. On a cold morning last winter, the subject was choosing a safe smartphone app to manage personal budgets.

Walker invited Kayla Hawkins, a 20-year-old student in her second year in the TOUR program, to the front of the room before two large Smart Boards that detailed a specific phone app’s functions.

“Would you use this app?” Walker asked Hawkins.

“Yes,” Hawkins replied. “It helps take the stress out of managing your money and tracks your money if you want to go on vacation.”

Hawkins, a native of Tampa, Florida, moved with her family to Rochester a few years ago and took American Sign Language courses this past academic year.

“I want to interact with people who are deaf,” she says. “My cousin is deaf.”

Hawkins worked in a Warner School office as part of the program and says TOUR has allowed her to feel more confident on the job. “I’ve gained independence and manage my time better,” she says.

Each student in the program partners with a traditional undergraduate student who serves as an academic coach. The coaches audit a University class chosen by the TOUR student, sit through each class, and discuss it afterward. It’s a paid job, but the money isn’t the real reward.

“If you want this job, you have to be dedicated to what you are doing,” says Khusbu Modi ’19, McGuckin’s coach and a biomedical engineering major from Jersey City, New Jersey. “I feel like Spenser is my peer rather than my mentee.”

All new academic coaches must take the class *Creating Inclusive Campus Communities: Disability, Mentorship, and Inclusive Higher Education*.

Taught by Lewis and offered through the College, the course familiarizes students with the history of disability, its shifting meanings, and how people with disabilities experience their lives.

The emphasis is on demonstrating the ways in which so-called disabilities might be more appropriately considered forms of diversity rather than as deficits measured against an elusive norm.

MaryAnna Krewson ’16 worked with five TOUR students in three years as an academic coach. The Schenectady, New York, native, who graduated with degrees in psychology and American Sign Language, made a point of introducing TOUR students to her friends.

“I wanted to get them chatting with peers outside their usual circle,” she says.

Krewson’s interactions with TOUR students weren’t limited to the courses taught.

“One of the TOUR students

loved cars and had plans to own a muscle car,” she says. “The problem was, he vastly underestimated the cost of owning a vehicle. I had him connect with one of my friends who was also a car enthusiast and owner. The three of us talked car-related expenses such as gas, insurance, and repairs.”

As for McGuckin, when he reflects on his experience in TOUR, he sounds like many students as they reflect on their growth in college. “Some things bother me more than they do other people,” he says, “but I really don’t think about it much. TOUR helped me learn how to work around my differences.”

And it helped him develop confidence and a greater sense of himself as well. “The thing I like best is becoming friends with people I’ve met,” he says. “It makes me feel like I’ve matured a lot.”

His mother, Meg Mackey, agrees that his social skills—an area of difficulty for many people on the autism spectrum—have improved dramatically.

“When Spenser entered TOUR in the fall of 2015, he was reserved and not comfortable meeting new people or encountering new situations,” she says. “That’s part of the magic of TOUR. His self-confidence wasn’t developed just in the TOUR classroom but in Rochester classrooms, through his jobs at St. John’s—a nearby nursing home—and Highland Hospital, in Rush Rhees Library hanging

out with his friends, and on the field at Fauver Stadium with his lacrosse teammates.”

This fall will mark a milestone for McGuckin. Having completed two years in the TOUR program, he’ll enroll in an internship at Wegmans Food Markets, a Rochester-based supermarket giant with more than 90 stores in six states on the East Coast.

Wegmans runs the internship program through Project SEARCH, a national organization founded by Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center that facilitates on-the-job training for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Funding from the Golisano Foundation has helped launch Project SEARCH partnerships not only with Wegmans, but also with other private companies, the Medical Center, and the City of Rochester.

Since its implementation in Rochester in 2010, more than 50 students have graduated from Project SEARCH and more than 70 percent have successfully transitioned into competitive employment.

McGuckin will have the opportunity to work with employees in a variety of roles at Wegmans, from cashier, prepared foods, the bakery, health and beauty, and stocking.

“We want to do our part to ensure people of all abilities have an opportunity for meaningful employment,” says Duane Hutt, Wegmans Rochester Division human resources manager. “We’ve hired some amazing employees through the program who have become hard-working and dedicated members of the Wegmans family.”

For now, McGuckin works part time in the cafeteria at Highland Hospital and serves as an usher and soup kitchen volunteer at his



church. His dream is to become an emergency medical technician.

“I like helping others,” he says. “I feel good after I do it.”

Reflecting on McGuckin’s TOUR experience, Lewis says he exemplified TOUR’s mission.

“He took courses, immersed himself on campus, and was just genuinely interested in all the University has to offer,” she says.

Mock points to strong evidence that the TOUR program is making a big difference. She cites a national study conducted by researchers at the University of Massachusetts–Boston.

It found that the employment rate for students with intellectual disabilities and autism who were exiting high school was, on average, 18 percent. But for those who take part in an initiative like TOUR, it’s 40 percent.

“That’s more than double,” she says.

Good, but not good enough.

“Ideally, we want it to be 100 percent,” Mock says, “because everyone deserves to work in their community.” **R**