BY SARAH BLACKWELDER-WILLIAMS

Diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome at age 17, Jason graduated from high school in Danville, California, and was excited about going away to college. He chose to attend a small university in central California and managed fairly well his first semester. But during his second semester, Jason failed several of his classes and was having difficulty navigating college life.

“I was there to pick up the pieces when Jason was in high school, but it became apparent that the only way college would work for Jason would be to send him to a more structured environment with psychological and social supports,” Melissa commented.

Jason, now 21, is a student at the College Internship Program (CIP) in Berkeley, Calif., and is also attending Berkeley City College nearby. CIP is one of the rising number of postsecondary programs in the U.S. offering individualized academic, internship and independent living experiences for college-age students with Asperger’s syndrome and other learning differences.

It is important to recognize that a significant increase in children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder in the mid-
late-1990s, as Jason was, has led to a dire need for more systems of support during the transition into adulthood. Autism affects approximately 67 million people worldwide, and there is no known single cause. From elementary school through high school, many children with learning differences are eligible for services required by law. But after high school, the supports disappear, leaving many students like Jason in need of additional help in building independent living skills and in bridging the gap to college and careers.

Offering Life Skills and Supports

At CIP, students receive key supports that lead to greater ability in self-advocacy, job internships and employment. The program offers individual curriculum modules, including classes in social skills, executive functioning, career development and independent living. The curriculum is also embedded in activities throughout the academic week, such as grocery shopping and attending weekly gatherings where students learn to cook together and share meals. Each week, they also partner with social mentors, who are typically graduate students. Mentors spend time helping students learn real-world activities in the community and support them in working on their main social challenges.

“My social mentor has helped me realize that I have to step outside my own interests and not force them on others. In my social thinking class, I am learning what to do in social situations. I am figuring out how to get to know my neighbors so I am not alone,” Jason says. “It’s not easy to make headway socially, and I have learned that the same tactics don’t always work with everyone and every situation.”

For many students on the spectrum, social anxiety and sensory issues can easily become overwhelming. Most attend college without being able to ask a teacher for help, work in a group or develop typical college friendships. Every student with autism arrives at college with a unique set of challenges, and most struggle with deficits in the areas of social, organizational and communication skills.

“In my 8 years at a private 4-year college [Menlo College] prior to coming here, I saw students on the spectrum attempt the neuro-typical college experience,” says Janet Miller, Program Director at CIP Berkeley. “But they came and left for lack of the broad supports they need in all areas— academic, social and apartment or dorm living. Parents want options for
their postsecondary students, but they often had to return back home, attempting community college and becoming more isolated. I respect the continuing struggle of these parents enormously even as they entrust us with their children with ongoing life challenges.”

Jason is interested in the engineering and music fields, and is taking three classes at Berkeley City College in conjunction with the offerings at CIP. Whether or not he graduates from a four-year college, Jason’s parents are happy to see him developing skills that will increase his chances of leading a fulfilling life. He recently won a national art contest with a song he self-produced and recorded that included a mix of drums, bass, guitar and vocals.

Now in his second year in the program, Jason has joined a band with some UC–Berkeley students. “I was standing by the elevator in my apartment building holding my drumsticks, and someone asked me if I played the drums,” Jason commented. “I said ‘yes’ and was then introduced to the members of a cool band I have been invited to join,” he continued. “I love music, and I’m really happy to be in this band. It feels like it’s getting easier to pursue relationships with different types of people. Now that I am in a band, I should be able to meet more people because we try to practice every week.”

Jason credits CIP staff for helping him. “I receive constant reminders of what’s important both socially and with my school work. Staff don’t let me just blow in the wind. I am prompted to use my time more wisely and attend social activities, and I have not missed a single class this semester.”

Other CIP Programs
In addition to community college classes, Jason also attends CIP’s new sessions on wellness that help to reduce stress and promote healthy lifestyles. “My wellness instructor gives me advice on how to live healthier, cook healthy foods and stay hydrated during long bike rides. I have become more aware of ingredients, and I seek out healthy recipes that include unsaturated fats. We also learn the importance of stretching and exercise.”

Jason is also enrolled in the Bookends Program where he creates and prioritizes organizational strategies for his academic and career goals. “In my Bookends class, we make goals at the beginning of each week and then assess them at the end of the week. This forces me to think about what I haven’t done and reduces the chance that I will forget something.”

Jason’s mom Melissa feels that “Jason is learning good organizational and life skills before he leaves home. Some simple ways to do this: get your teenager used to being woken up by an alarm clock instead of by a parent; give her a day planner (or a phone app that works like one) and have her enter every commitment, including things like “study for English test”; start working on academic survival skills like reviewing materials right after class—not just when there’s a test—and asking classmates if they’ll share notes.
feature / Bridging the Gap

Get your child acquainted with his future home.

Once you know where your child will be going, take him there as often as you can so he can learn his way around. If it’s too far to visit, take advantage of the Internet: He can study the school’s Web site and learn where everything is.

Have a support system already in place before he leaves home.

The extent of this system will depend on each student’s needs, but at the very least your child should know where to go if he feels overwhelmed, isolated or at risk of academic failure. And most young adults on the spectrum will need a lot more than emergency help; they’ll need frequent checks to make sure things are going smoothly, classroom support, help with social integration and engagement, and possibly even some basic daily hygiene reminders.

You’re going to need to check in frequently to make sure nothing is being neglected, either in person or with someone you trust who can be your eyes and ears on campus.

Adapted from Momlogic.com’s “Sending Your Child with Autism to College.” For the full article, go to www.momlogic.com/2009/05/austistic_child_going_to_college.php.

skills, including budgeting, shopping, cooking and cleaning his apartment.” She also notices that “his attitude is better and he is less reactive to uncomfortable environments. He volunteers and does fun activities on weekends with other students, and is a happier person.”

At CIP, six levels of support are offered, depending on the individual needs of the student. In addition to its year-round programs, CIP also offers two-week summer programs for teens aged 16–19. While attending these action-packed summer programs, teens learn important skills needed for transitioning from high school to college or pursuing career interests. They also get a taste of the year-round comprehensive curriculum while having lots of fun.

CIP’s founder Dr. Michael McManmon has an inside perspective; he has been diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome. “It is important for our students to accept who they are and find their islands of competencies,” Dr. McManmon says. “We’re like Apples in an IBM world; we process differently. This is a social interface we need to develop. We are all made for good purpose and are inherently valuable.”

Jason agrees. “I am learning to maximize myself,” he says. “I will get to where I want to go. I just won’t do it as fast as some people, and that’s okay.”

About the Program

The College Internship Program has centers located in Berkeley, Calif.; Lee, Mass.; Bloomington, Ind.; and Melbourne, Fla. Tuition at each of the centers ranges from $15,500–$69,500 for the year-round curriculum that addresses the special needs of students with Asperger’s as well as ADHD and other learning differences. For further information about CIP, visit www.collegeinternshipprogram.com or contact 1–877–Know–CIP.

About the Author SARAH BLACKWELDER-WILLIAMS

Sarah Blackwelder-Williams is the parent of a son with Asperger’s Syndrome who recently attended CIP’s Berkeley Center.