

Opening Doors

UNH-4U program introduces students with intellectual disabilities to campus life

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ANDREW STRZYKALSKI IS ONE OF FOUR STUDENTS IN THE INAUGURAL COHORT OF THE UNH-4U PROGRAM.

Andrew Strzykalski's mother and father were battling more than the typical parental nerves when they dropped their son off at college for the first time this fall. Perhaps that explains how they spent their afternoon after leaving Andrew to settle into his new life as a student at UNH.

“I don’t think we left the campus after we dropped him off. We just sat in the parking lot all day,” Andrew’s mother, Barbara, admits.

The nerves Barbara and her husband Gerald were experiencing were atypical because Andrew isn’t a typical college student – he’s one of the first students to take part in the new [UNH-4U program](#) that offers fully immersive and inclusive higher-education opportunities to young adults with intellectual disabilities. Andrew is one of four students – three residential and one commuter – in the program’s inaugural cohort. UNH-4U is the only program of its kind in New Hampshire.

Andrew had never before spent extensive time away from home or had to navigate a complex daily schedule of classes and activities by himself. How would he handle such a significant change?

As it turns out, his parents wouldn’t be the only ones who resisted driving home from campus.

“A few weeks ago we had a meeting where we told him he had to go home for the holiday break, and he just shut down and wouldn’t participate in the rest of the call,” Barbara quips. “He just loves it there so much. He’s more verbal, he’s more outgoing, he’s more confident. He has really just come into his own.”

Such is the precise goal of the UNH-4U program, which has been more than five years in the making. It came to fruition thanks in part to individual donations and grants from the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation John Vance A.C.C.E.S.S. Fund, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education, the New Hampshire Council on Developmental Disabilities, the area agency system and the New Hampshire Department of Education-Vocational Rehabilitation. The program opens doors to a mostly traditional college experience that was previously closed to students with intellectual disabilities.

Students in the two-year program go through a separate admissions process and don’t earn a traditional degree, but are placed in classes that match their academic interests with the intent of starting them on a path to gainful employment after college. Along the way, they gain experience and life skills that are difficult to replicate in other scenarios.

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“Now that we have launched and the students are actually here, it’s truly transformative,” says Tobey Partch-Davies, project director at the [UNH Institute on Disability](#). “What’s going on with these students, it’s life-changing. They are experiencing a level of independence and academic success that many never dreamed possible.”

The early returns certainly seem to bear that out. Students in the program are immersed in UNH life, living in residence halls, taking classes and eating in dining halls with all

other UNH students. They are encouraged to take part in extracurricular activities and explore all that campus has to offer.

They are supported through that journey by a network of people, including professors, residence life staff and, perhaps most prominently, UNH-4U staff members who coordinate and monitor student success.

“We see milestones happen almost every week,” says Brianna Hayward, who coordinates Andrew’s experience. Andrew, for his part, seems to have settled in quite nicely, referring to himself as something of “a celebrity” on campus.

“Everyone knows me,” he says.

Dayna Hookway is a commuter student whose fascination with all things weather prompted her to enroll in an online course, elements of weather. She commutes to campus for meetings and occasional social opportunities, and the ability to focus her studies on something she’s so passionate about has already left an impression.

“I can tell you that this has opened doors for Dayna,” says Dayna’s mother, Jackie Hookway. “The opportunity came at the right time for her in her development. She’s ready for it.”

“I really like my class, and my professor is awesome,” Dayna says. “I’ve loved things like weather and thunderstorms and tornadoes ever since I was seven years old.”

"Being in a close-knit community and showing people that you can thrive there has allowed them to really showcase who they truly are as people. These students are very independent."

Encouraging the UNH-4U students to explore courses tied to their existing passions and curiosities has played a significant role in their engagement – and aligns with the program’s goal of setting the stage for fulfilling career opportunities.

“The whole premise of the program is we don’t want these students to stand out as being different, we want them to fully immerse themselves into the college experience,” says Karen Martin-Brown, who helps coordinate Dayna’s experience. “Dayna has said how much she loves her class. That’s the thing that really sparks her.”

Andrew Strzykalski has a similar passion for nutrition and wellness, and he’s enrolled in one section of Amy Taetzsch’s nutrition 400 course alongside more than 100 other UNH students. Next semester, he plans to take part in an independent study working with athletes on campus doing work around body composition, Taetzsch ’09 says.

“The students involved in this program are going to gain skills and knowledge that will help them maneuver in the real world, both in the classroom and outside of it,” Taetzsch says. “The fact that UNH is able to support that growth and development is really fabulous.”

That same engagement has often carried over to the students' living situations, as several of them have immersed themselves in residence life, making friends with classmates that share their hallways and participating in building-wide activities.

All three residential students live in the Upper Quad, where Brittany Cotton is the residence hall director. She says she's enjoyed watching each of their individual personalities emerge and their confidence grow over the course of the few months she's known them.

"Being in a close-knit community and showing people that you can thrive there has allowed them to really showcase who they truly are as people," Cotton says. "These students are very independent."

The impact of that growth and self-discovery has made an impression on more than just the students in the program, too.

"I think that's powerful for our students to see," Taetzsch says of how seamlessly the UNH-4U students have integrated. "Our UNH students really need to be given a lot of credit for how inclusive they are, and this program will help showcase and continue to develop that."

Partch-Davies said the hope is to continue growing the program at UNH, but in the bigger picture the goal is to build capacity for similar programs at other colleges, so as many students as possible can take advantage of the benefits.

Those benefits will likely continue to reveal themselves for the students as they complete the program and pursue employment, but many of them have been visible almost from the start.

"It's really given us a sense of how much potential he has – he's more articulate, he has a natural curiosity about things, and there isn't a challenge that he's not ready to accept," Gerald Strzykowski says of Andrew. "It's just changed his life. He now has an opportunity for a meaningful career. Who could want more than that?"

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