

Aggies Elevated: Revolutionary Program Helps Students with Disabilities Succeed in Higher Education | CEHS

09/22/2016



College is a difficult time for many people. But for students with disabilities, it has its own set of challenges — which is why Utah State University established a revolutionary program called Aggies Elevated.

Over the course of the two-year program, students with disabilities learn skills in five main areas: academics, independent living, vocation, self-determination, and campus and community engagement.

“Just like any student who goes to college, it’s an opportunity to explore,” said Sarah Bodily, the program director. “We support the full college experience.”

In addition to technical knowledge, students are taught the so-called soft skills that don’t always come naturally to people with disabilities.

“We work on communication with coworkers, how to present yourself, physical appearance, body language — a lot of these skills need to be taught to a student with disabilities,” Bodily said. “They don’t recognize them as easily.”

Troy Shumway came all the way from California to learn those skills. “I have autism,” he said. “It affects the way I think and learn.”

Shumway came to Utah State seeking more independence. He wanted to learn to socialize and interact

with other people. Each week in Aggies Elevated, he set three goals for involvement at USU. “We all know that our parents aren’t going to be there forever to take care of us,” Shumway said. “This program really helps young adults with disabilities become independent.”

During her time at Aggies Elevated, Jenna Mosher interned at a local school, which, she said, “was so much fun.” Her dream is to work with children who have disabilities. “I want this to continue because I want them to have the experience that I had,” she said.

Fortunately for Mosher, there is a nationwide movement toward higher education for those with disabilities. There are 238 programs like Aggies Elevated across the country, but very few in the West—in fact, 80 percent of programs are east of Kansas.

Utah State University, however, is quickly becoming a leader in the West. The federal government awarded Aggies Elevated a \$1.1 million grant over the next five years to provide training to other programs.

“What we’re doing has worked for us, and we’re more than willing to help,” Bodily said. “We sometimes feel like we’re building this plane as it’s flying. We’d like to give other planes as many parts and pieces as we can before they take off.”

Utah State is the only university in Utah with a full-fledged program, but other universities are starting to follow suit. After a decade of preparation, USU graduated its first Aggies Elevated class in May.

“We did it,” Bodily said. “They are now working, looking for jobs, and traveling—doing things that two years ago would not have even been on their radar.”