Faculty Perspective Regarding Post-Secondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Advancing Students Toward Education and Employment Program (ASTEP)

Jenna Arnold

Minot State University

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For the past nine years, the North Dakota Center for Persons with Disabilities (NDCPD) at Minot State University (MSU), in collaboration with Dakota College at Bottineau (DCB) and MSU, has implemented a Post-Secondary Education (PSE) program called Advancing Students Toward Education and Employment (ASTEP). The goal of ASTEP is to provide the necessary supports for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) to attend college alongside their peers without disabilities.

A unique aspect of the ASTEP program is the partnership that has developed with MSU and DCB. The ASTEP staff have a close relationship with faculty and staff on campus, as well as employers in the community. One of the biggest aspects of the ASTEP program is academics, and for this to be successful, ASTEP staff and mentors work closely with the faculty. The ASTEP program would not be as effective without the support of faculty.

Early in the enrollment process, the ASTEP academic coordinator meets with faculty to answer any questions they might have about teaching a student with an intellectual disability. The academic coordinator also gives details of the learning goals and expectations of each student. Most professors are very accepting and welcoming to having a student with ID take their class. Some professors are a bit more hesitant to having a student with ID audit their class. Professors sometimes are concerned it will be more work for them to have a student with ID audit their class because they might have to modify assignments or tests for the student. While working with faculty over the past year, it was evident that many of them had not taught individuals with disabilities and their interaction with the students in the ASTEP program was their first-time teaching students with disabilities.

Dudley-Marling & Burns (2014) write about assumptions that are all too common in classrooms with individuals with disabilities stating, “The assumption was that the inclusion of
students into regular educational settings would demand so much attention from teachers as to have a detrimental effect on the education of students without disabilities.” This assumption is all too common for not only K-12 teachers, but also for professors teaching in higher education. There might just be a lack of understanding or awareness. Dr. Aili Smith, a professor of theater at MSU, commented on this assumption and her experience working with students in the ASTEP program, “At first, I was a bit hesitant. I don't have training or education in teaching students with disabilities, so I thought I might ‘fail.’ It has turned out to be a great experience each time I work with a new student” (A. Smith, personal communication, April 30, 2019). The way that Dr. Smith feels is the same way many other faculty feel including having thoughts of being nervous, not sure they had enough experience, and unsure of their abilities.

Phil Koapke, a professor of computer science with DCB at MSU, has taught and continues to teach several of the students in the ASTEP program and accepts students without hesitation. When asked what her initial thoughts were when she was asked to include and teach students within the ASTEP program, she commented saying she was nervous and that, “I think that it is fair to say that needs of students with and without disabilities vary and can be challenging. My biggest fear is how I would handle any behavioral issues” (P. Koapke, personal communication, March 26, 2019).

Inclusion is a huge part of the ASTEP program, as students are never segregated in classes. The aspect of inclusion not only affects the faculty, but it impacts the other students in the class as well. Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012 (as cited in Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014) state, “Additionally, there is evidence that the presence of students with disabilities in the regular classroom does not negatively affect the academic performance of students without disabilities.”
One student in the ASTEP program was very interested in learning sign language, so she took American Sign Language I with MariDon Sorum, MSU special education department faculty member. When talking with Professor Sorum about the ASTEP student’s inclusion in the class, Sorum commented that, “Students included her [ASTEP student] in small group practice, and she began to come to class prepared to sign. She enjoyed researching new signs on the computer and was excited to come to class,” (M. Sorum, personal communication, March 19, 2019). This is a perfect example of inclusion.

Another way the ASTEP program supports and promotes inclusion is by having peer mentors who are college age students taking classes with students in the ASTEP program. In almost every class the ASTEP students are taking, there is an academic peer mentor who supports them during class. Having a peer mentor in the class not only helps with academics, but also encourages students to participate and interact with their peers. Many of the students in ASTEP talk about partnering with peers in their class for a project or an assignment in class. Peers in the class do an amazing job of including and supporting ASTEP students. Dr. Aili Smith mentioned that, “The peers in each class react positively to each student in the ASTEP program. Awareness of different learning styles is essential in an undergraduate experience” (A. Smith, personal communication, April 30, 2019). This process of having peer mentors taking classes with students in the ASTEP program promotes a natural aspect of college life. Ashby, 2012 (as cited in Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014) writes, “the mere physical presence of students with disabilities in regular education settings does nothing to undo the educational structures that create and perpetuate hierarchies of ability and disability.”
Education for young adults who have just graduated high school and are hoping to enter college is extremely important. Although faculty had concerns, the overall reaction to ASTEP students in college classes has been positive.

Dr. Aili Smith spoke at the annual ASTEP graduate’s recognition program and said to family, friends, faculty, and employers, “I believe ASTEP is a wonderful opportunity and offering on the MSU Campus. It has opened my mind and eyes to a different and unique way of teaching and communicating” (A. Smith, personal communication, April 30, 2019). Along with this statement, Phil Koapke echoed Dr. Smith by saying, “It has been my experience that the students are hardworking, have excellent attendance, socialize well with their peers, and accomplish so much” (P. Koapke, personal communication, March 26, 2019). Finally, MariDon Sorum said this about teaching students in the ASTEP program, “I found the experience to be very rewarding” (M. Sorum, personal communication, March 19, 2019). Linda Olson, professor of art at MSU also stated, “I really appreciate the tone that the ASTEP students bring to the class. It was good to see other students interacting with them in positive ways” (L. Olson, personal communication, December 2019).

Overall, the perspective of faculty with DCB and MSU was very honest when approached by ASTEP staff about having students with ID in their classrooms. Faculty expressed concerns that students with ID would require additional attention, would need modified assignments and tests, and that the students would have challenging behavioral issues. While these were valid concerns, the ASTEP mentors and staff worked closely with faculty to provide support on methods for inclusion in the classroom. Ongoing communication with faculty throughout the semester provides classroom success for students with ID.