



## Transition Pathways

### A Collection of Innovative Approaches to Improve Outcomes for Young Adults with Autism

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The A.J. Drexel Autism Institute is the first research organization built around a public health science approach to understanding and addressing the challenges of autism spectrum across the lifespan.

**The Challenge:** Most young adults on the autism spectrum do not transition successfully from high school into employment or postsecondary education and community participation.

**Our Mission:** *To develop innovative and collaborative approaches for youth on the autism spectrum to achieve a successful transition to adulthood and reach their full potential.*

**Our Vision:** *Creating a world where people on the autism spectrum are valued and supported as contributing members of our communities who have roles to play and dreams to pursue.*

## Current Projects

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**Project SEARCH** is an intensive internship program for high school students with disabilities to acquire job skills leading to employment. With over 300 sites worldwide and a 20-year record of success, Project SEARCH programs have helped countless youth attain employment. However, young people with autism have consistently had poorer outcomes – leading the Project SEARCH group to develop an autism-specific version of their model. Drexel is one of the first universities to adopt and pilot test this new version and will collaborate closely with the Project SEARCH home office to refine the model in successive years.

**The Drexel Academic and Career Program (DAC)** is a two-year program based at Drexel University started in September 2017. The DAC program adapts nationally recognized models for helping youth with disabilities participate in postsecondary education. The program is a postsecondary experience for young people with ASD and or intellectual disability to have an inclusive campus experience without matriculating as a degree-seeking undergraduate. The program aims to promote competitive integrated employment, increase independent living skills, and foster social and community engagement. The program began with a small initial cohort of 3 students in a non-residential program.

**Capacity Building Model I** Transition Pathways is the catalyst to help existing youth development organizations and community partners expand the reach of their programs to include youth with autism. Many organizations aim to provide employment and mentoring experiences to high school youth. However, for students with autism, opportunities to participate in these programs are rarely available with the supports necessary to succeed. Most organizations do not have the knowledge or infrastructure to provide the supports needed to ensure youth with autism can successfully participate.



**Pilot** | Transition Pathways developed a partnership between the nonprofit Student Conservation Association, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, Community Integrated Services, and the Philadelphia School District. The Student Conservation Association (SCA) is a national nonprofit founded in 1957 whose mission is to build the next generation of conservation leaders and inspire lifelong stewardship of the environment and communities by engaging young people in hands-on service to the land. This pilot project took place during summer 2017 and facilitated the successful inclusion of youth with autism in SCA's Greater Philadelphia summer programs. Participants earned money while building trails and restoring habitat. Transition Pathways convened community partners to identify six youth with autism to participate and developed braided funding to hire additional staff to support the youth to be included in the program successfully. This collaboration built the capacity of SCA to serve and include youth with autism in their programming. Currently, we are exploring opportunities to replicate this model in additional SCA's summer programs, thereby expanding impact to a regional level.

**Customized Technical Assistance and Training** Transition Pathways provide workshops and training to community employers and service providers. Currently, as part of a contract with Community Integrated Services, Transition Pathways, offers a monthly training for local supported employment agencies as part of the ACRE (Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators) Training. This 5- hour course focuses on understanding the characteristics of autism, discussing and practicing evidence-based strategies for teaching vocational and social skills, and developing visual supports. Additionally, professional development workshops have been provided to over 100 employees at the Philadelphia International Airport as part of the "City as a Model Employer" inclusive workforce initiative. This training has since been adapted and shared with other local businesses and organizations such as the Pennsylvania Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology and the HUB @ PA CareerLink West.

## Launching Fall 2018

**Pathways to Employment and Community Connections:** *Creating opportunity for youth with autism and other disabilities* Transition Pathways is partnering with Community Integrated Services and Mastery Charter Schools to help youth with autism and other disabilities transition from school to meaningful community connections, employment, and postsecondary success. Our innovative approach takes instruction out of the classroom and brings students into the community during the last years of high school, helping them access the vast resources of our city as they explore careers, learn job skills, secure employment, and prepare for adult life.

**This initiative will braid funding and resources to collaboratively:**

- Implement evidence-based practices to develop youth skills for community employment
- Provide opportunities for youth to improve social, civic, and leadership skills
- Connect youth to opportunities for social engagement
- Provide work-based learning experiences within area businesses
- Promote family engagement and support high expectations for employment
- Connect youth to the adult services they will need for continued support
- Assist youth to reach their full potential