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Program boosts Iowa students with learning disabilities

IOWA CITY Stacy Winkler is in many ways a typical first-year college student.

She likes her math and career exploration classes, going to Hawkeye games and meeting new people. She jokes with her friend Allie during study sessions. She wants to finish school and move back to her hometown of Marshalltown for a good job. And she admits she gets homesick.

"My sister, when she was a freshman here, she called home a lot. Now I'm doing that," the 20-year-old University of Iowa student said. "It's a big challenge because you have a lot of responsibilities."

Winkler is one of 18 students from five states enrolled in the UI's new two-year REACH program for young adults with multiple learning and intellectual disabilities. The students face universal college concerns and hold similar goals.

REACH aims to help them overcome their additional challenges and prepare them for independent life.

"Many of them want that opportunity afterward, and they know if they don't have the skills they won't be able to," Amy Vander Busard, student life coordinator, said.

Students especially like learning those life skills in a traditional college setting.

"It's like learning to get along with the community of this university," REACH student Brian Pierson said.

The 21-year-old from Washington, Iowa, is thinking about joining the student-run UI Dance Marathon. He volunteered with Relay for Life in his hometown.

"It's a good organization. I like that," he said. Part of the program's focus is getting students involved in campus life. Football games, fitness class, movies, concerts and campus events are listed on the weekly calendar. The hope is that students eventually attend events on their own, Vander Busard said.

The students live in Stanley Hall — males on ninth floor, females on 10th — and have a nightly curfew. Resident assistants are there to help and there are regular room checks.

"They'll see if you need help with laundry or cleaning," student Allie Thompson, 19, said. "It really does help."

Money management is a big part of the program. It's the area for which parents requested the most help.

During a recent personal finance class, students looked through grocery ads to plan weekly menus and budgets.

"The cereal is on sale but what if we don't need three boxes of cereal?" instructor Deborah Larson asked. "We have to think about that." They also have talked about choosing a bank, budgeting for an apartment, managing a checkbook and signing a lease with a roommate.

Each class has at least two instructors, and the students attend mandatory study tables three nights a week.

Next semester the students start internships. They've already toured a few places, like Target and the Veteran's Affairs Medical Center, to see what they might like.

REACH students must have a high school diploma or certificate, meet math and reading level requirements and have work or volunteer experience, among other things.

Before classes began, the students had a two-week orientation to find their way around campus and get to know each other and their instructors.

"That's one of their biggest academic challenges," Vander Busard said. "They need to build trust in the instructors because so many of them had such a stressful high school experience."

The students are blossoming, instructors said.

"We have our bad days but it's amazing to see how far they've come," Larson said.

The students in this inaugural class will act as mentors when the new class enrolls next fall. Program leaders hope to enroll 20 to 25 students each year.

"We'll be able to show them around and answer their questions," Pierson said. "I think it's really neat."

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