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To learn more about Micah Fialka-Feldman, visit: www.throughthesamedoor.com

Hidden Treasures Behind Closed Doors

Janice Fialka and Richard Feldman

When our son Micah was a toddler and being evaluated for his many developmental delays, a psychologist asked us, “Does Micah ever become frustrated when he can’t do something or can’t get something he wants?” Picturing our happy, mild-mannered child, my husband and I looked at each other and answered in unison, “Rarely.” Micah was pretty low-key most of the time, content to sit and observe the world around him. He didn’t seem interested in stacking blocks, or emptying drawers or pulling himself up on the furniture, activities that fascinated – and sometimes frustrated – his playgroup peers. “He’s such a good boy,” the other parents would say as they pulled their howling toddlers away from the allure of electric sockets or swinging doors, and we had to agree. Micah’s contentedness was endearing and easy for us as harried new parents.

But later, as we reflected on the psychologist’s question, a new idea began

to stir in us. Perhaps a certain sense of frustration was essential to Micah’s growth and development. We began to recognize that satisfaction would not spur Micah to try new things, to achieve more – to reach for the wooden block on the shelf or to coax his chubby fingers to grasp the ball. As long as Micah was content to sit, when would he walk? If we continued to anticipate his every need, when would he learn to talk? And so we began that lifelong awkward dance of parenthood, dancing between honoring who he was as a person and nudging him to try new things, to want more, to be dissatisfied with what he could do. Although it was often uncomfortable, we learned that we had to challenge Micah and encourage others to have great expectations for him too. We learned to embrace frustration as a precursor to progress.

As he grew and entered school, it was apparent that Micah liked to keep things easy-going. He didn’t like being frustrated

or seeing others upset and often tried to be the peacemaker. He liked being liked by people and won many friends with his contagious smile and concern for others. In third grade, Micah’s insightful teacher told us about Howard Gardner’s work on multiple intelligences and described Micah as being “people-smart,” as evidenced by his attunement and responsiveness to his classmates. The teacher’s description was empowering and reassuring to us. Children with labels such as cognitive impairment are rarely referred to as smart. But this wise teacher knew better.

Throughout his teenage years we had a few flickerings that Micah had opinions and desires for “something more,” but in the midst of sleepless nights we worried that he might not push to reach his full potential, especially if it might create hassles or dissonance for others. Micah’s oft-repeated mantra was, “I’m fine. Everything’s fine.” Little did we know that tucked inside his sweet soul,

hidden behind that magnetic smile, there was an emerging sense of righteousness and dignity that would ignite in due time, *when it was really important to him*. At age 23, he would demonstrate to us and to the larger world how profoundly motivated he could be when frustrated – in this case, by injustice.

Opening the College Door

In 2003, when he was 19, Micah joined the first major wave of students with intellectual disabilities (ID) across the country who were attending college. He enrolled in the Options program at Oakland University, a fully inclusive program for students with ID. He got a student identification card, attended three classes most semesters, participated in student organizations, went on a student bus trip to Chicago to cheer on the basketball team at the NCAA Playoffs, attended the Presidential Inauguration in Washington, DC with his classmates, participated in the student leadership retreat and, in his own words, became “a college guy.”

After a few years of taking two buses each day to campus, and shortly after helping to move his sister into her dorm, Micah decided that he wanted the full college experience –including dorm living. In October 2007, he arranged for a tour of the dorm with a friend, and later with his dad and the director of housing. He learned about the cost of living in the dorm and the various meal choices available. He selected a meal plan that would provide three meals a day (including unlimited French fries!) at numerous sites on campus. He completed the housing application form with his father and with eager anticipation submitted it to the housing office.

At first, there was no frustration, just feelings of excitement as Micah anticipated no more buses, sleeping in late, and having 24-hour access to cable TV. Within a few weeks he received confirmation that his housing application was accepted and he was given an official move-in date of January 8, 2008. To secure his placement, he submitted the \$100 deposit and marked his calendar with the big letter “D” which meant “moving into the dorm” (and “getting away from my parents, finally!”).

But a few weeks later, my husband and I received an early morning email

from a college administrator informing us that Micah could not move into the dorm due to “administrative issues.” We sat at the computer stunned, reading and re-reading the four short sentences that would catapult Micah and the university into a two-year tangle of truth-testing and life-changing conversations.

Up to this point, the university had been remarkably supportive, committed, and innovative in its full inclusion of Micah and other students with ID into campus life. The school was, in all respects, an exemplary leader in postsecondary education for students with ID.

In our efforts to understand this unexpected reversal of an agreement, we learned that an administrator opposed allowing Micah to move into the dorm because of groundless concerns that he might not be able to respond to a fire alarm, that other dorm students might be cruel to him, and that his move into the dorm might set a precedent that anyone taking even one class could live in the dorm. Each of these issues was unfounded. In particular, Micah’s ability to live in the dorm was predicated on his official enrollment as a student in a university-sponsored program. Later we learned that the university revised the housing form shortly *after* they admitted Micah into the dorm. The revision stipulated a new requirement that a student be matriculated in order to apply for dorm living. Although Micah was an official university student via the Options program, he was not considered a matriculated student.

Micah was faced with a conflict. He loved his university, his classmates, his




Micah's family and legal team outside the Courthouse after the ruling that the university must provide campus housing for Micah, a university student.

professors, and the administrators. Due to his friendly nature, he knew more of the campus community than most students. He also fiercely wanted to live in the dorm. How would he handle his intense desire – his right – to live in the dorm and still remain on a friendly basis with his college community? Micah had a history of opening doors, beginning in early elementary school when he declared that he wanted to go in the same door as his friends and be in general education classes. What would he do about this door – the dorm door – being shut in his face?

Opening the Dorm Door

The following two years were a crash course in real-world advocacy and self-determination for Micah and his community. Micah had become frustrated and felt compelled to “do something.” He had grown up in the era of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and had been fully included throughout his school career. He also had been mentored by strong young activists with disabilities who had helped him understand disability not as a deficiency or misfortune but as a difference and a unique experience. All of these experiences



came into play when Micah realized he was being discriminated against.

Soon after hearing the unwelcome news, Micah, on his own, scheduled a meeting with a key administrator to explain his desire and right to live in the dorm. To prepare for this important meeting, Micah worked with a professor to talk through what he wanted to say to the administrator. He practiced delivering his major points with determination and respect. When the administrator did not reverse the decision, Micah met with other students for support and ideas. With their help, he created a petition-and-letter-writing campaign resulting in 300 letters and 1,000 student signatures supporting Micah and protesting the discriminatory housing policy.

Next, Micah took a bold step and spoke at the public meeting of the University Board of Trustees. With dignity and poise he stood at the podium, thanking the university for opening its doors to him and other students with similar disabilities. He explained that he was officially a student as evidenced by his enrollment in the Options program. He paid full tuition, participated in classes and student organizations, volunteered on campus, and had his housing application accepted and his enrollment check deposited by the university. He explained why he wanted to live in the dorm and why it was his right to do so. There was a hushed silence as he spoke, and our eyes brimmed, since there had been a time when had we questioned if he would ever be able to talk.

He returned to his seat and intently listened to the next testimony. It was given by a long-time member of the Michigan State Board of Education who joined Micah in praising the pioneering spirit of the university. She articulated the reasons why Micah had a right to live in the dorm and reminded the Board of Trustees and administration of the recently reauthorized Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA), which provides federal funding for model demonstration programs at institutions of higher education, initiates groundbreaking policies supporting students with ID to attend college, and makes students with ID eligible for Pell Grants. She was followed by a passionate presentation by a disability law attorney.

Within a few days, Micah was informed via a letter that the dorm

door remained shut to him and other students with ID. He was sad and mad (and frustrated) but undeterred. He met with friends and several student organizations to explain his situation. With the involvement of many students, a forum was held to discuss the issues. The Sociology Club held a rally and marched through the student union holding signs and chanting, "Micah is a student." As news of the issue spread, formal and informal conversations continued, not only on campus but also across the country, discussing what it meant to be a college student. The university student council extended support, and Micah again addressed the Board of Trustees. This time many students – as well as faculty, alumni, and others – spoke on behalf of Micah's right to live in the dorm.

This particular university is not known for campus activism, but the issue of Micah's studenthood sparked the moral ire of many students, many of whom had attended public schools where full inclusion of individuals with disabilities was the norm. For those who had grown up living and learning alongside students with disabilities, having Micah and his Options classmates on campus and in the dorm made sense. For others, it just seemed right. Many students felt compelled to support Micah and speak out on the broader issue of discrimination and the university's discriminatory actions.

After repeated efforts to negotiate with the university, Micah met with Michigan Protection and Advocacy Service, Inc. and decided to file a lawsuit against the university for discrimination against him. This was not an easy decision for Micah, and yet he possessed a clarity that took our breath away. As he emailed one friend, using his voice-to-text technology, "If I give up, most things won't change."

The next year-and-a-half included many meetings, a deposition, two hearings in federal court, and many conversations with family and friends. One of the most demanding experiences for Micah was the deposition, in which he was interrogated for five hours. The unexpected use of a video camera and the seating of the university administrator directly in front of him the entire time didn't deter Micah from answering the questions and staying engaged. Micah's lawyer said that Micah handled the

undue pressure magnificently, answering each question with respect and poise.

On December 23, 2009, two long years after we received that early morning email blocking Micah's right to move into the dorm, U.S. District Court Judge Patrick Duggan ruled that the university must provide campus housing for Micah. As Micah put it, "The judge understood that I was a student." The victory for Micah and for the larger community was covered by newspapers and radio shows across the country, including NPR. He became CNN's Intriguing Person of the Day.

On January 4, 2010, Micah moved into the dorm. As we carried boxes of his belongings toward his long-desired new home, we were deeply touched by the many students and their parents who greeted Micah with handshakes and words of congratulations and welcome. Micah simply nodded, smiled his infectious smile and said to each person, "Thank you. I'm happy to live in the dorm." (To watch Micah move into the dorm, go to www.throughthesamedoor.com.)

What Unexpected Treasures did Micah Find Behind the Door?

Since December 2007, when we received the e-mail indicating that the dorm door was (temporarily) shut on Micah, we have heard Micah express the following thoughts. His words best reveal the unexpected treasures Micah gained through this experience.

- I got more confident.
- I learned I could do really hard things.
- I learned how to be a strong advocate.
- I learned I could speak out and tell my story in my words.
- I learned I could understand most of what my lawyer said, and when I didn't understand him, I learned I could ask him to repeat it in a different way.
- I learned that sometimes life is hard and doesn't make sense.
- I thought it was going to be easy. I didn't know it was going to take two years.
- I learned "I can do it, but not alone."
- I learned what discrimination feels like and it isn't good. I learned I can fight it.



- I learned that a lot of people understood that I was a student, but not everyone understood that.
- I learned that I can talk to administrators by myself.
- I learned that people change their stories.
- I learned that professors can help me.
- My parents learned . . . a lot. They learned I can do hard things.
- I learned that when I feel upset I can talk with someone or listen to music.
- I learned why my parents and teachers taught me about Rosa Parks and Harriet Tubman.
- I learned that sometimes life is hard, and I am not always happy but I can get through it.
- I learned why it is important to talk with other people with disabilities.
- I learned that going through this fight helped me know that I wanted big things to happen for me and that gave me the confidence to move to New York and work at Syracuse University. (See page 24 of this publication to hear Micah's story of moving to Syracuse.)

In the course of this two-year ordeal, Micah earned a Ph.D. in self-advocacy, so to speak. No PowerPoint or self-determination class could adequately teach what Micah learned. He lived it.

There was nothing glamorous about these lessons. Micah often came home troubled and confused about why he could not live in the dorm. It seemed so unfair; he was a student in every other sense of the word. He was forced to struggle with what might be called the existential questions of life: how to question authority, what it means to be a student, what it means to be human.

Living in this frustrating ambiguity, Micah learned the power of persistence, community, asking for help, and getting through tough times. He learned that when faced with adversity, it is important to connect, to converse, and to continue – not to hide. In reaching out to others, he heard stories about people who faced adversity and how they handled it. That inspired him to go on. Suddenly all the stories read to him at home and in school about Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks had real meaning to him and gave him direction. He began to see his story as part of a bigger story.

He learned that sometimes there weren't clear answers, and that friendly people, people who smiled and said 'hello' to you in the university hallways, could also discriminate against you. He learned that social smooth sailing didn't necessarily mean the absence of conflict. He learned that everyone has "life is hard" experiences, and that simply knowing that you're not alone can get you through the tough times.

As parents, we learned that we could not protect Micah from all the hard stuff. We had to "let go" (not give up!) and support him, often from afar. As much as we wanted to find that magic wand to keep him out of harm's way, we knew that he had the right to make his own choices, even if it meant "failing" or feeling troubled, sad, or mad. We can't say it was easy, but we began to deepen our trust that Micah could grow in his confidence and skills. We realized that if we tried to shield him from the frustrations of life, he'd never reach his full potential.

We are profoundly aware that Micah could never have pursued this fight without the support of others. We witnessed the powerful impact this experience had on students and professors, both on campus and across the country, who rallied in support of Micah. We are indebted to Micah's attorney, Chris Davis of Michigan Protection and Advocacy, Inc., who always respected Micah and believed in his abilities. Chris never wavered in his professional obligation to "communicate with the client and to let the client set the direction at all times." He made sure Micah understood what was happening and what his choices were. He honored Micah's often-asked question, "But why?" and he appreciated Micah's need to have things explained in basic terms. Chris later told us how Micah's questions sometimes challenged him to think more clearly about what he said and how to articulate complicated matters in concise ways.

Two years is a long time to struggle with an issue. Honestly, we were uncertain if Micah would be steadfast in pursuing his desire to live in the dorm. We had assured him that he could change his mind and stop at any time; he had our full support and respect regardless of the path he chose. When he got discouraged, we reminded him that what he had

done so far in pursuing his dream was more than most people ever do.

Throughout those two years, there was no guarantee that Micah would grow, thrive, and build his self-determination. But all those things happened when he faced up to his frustration and didn't back down. On the night before his federal court hearing, Micah sat somberly, still bewildered by the university's persistent fight to keep him from living in the dorm. He shook his head in disbelief at the thought that tomorrow he would be sitting in a courtroom. As Micah shared his thoughts and feelings, we sat perfectly still, longing to say something that would make it all better. We had no words, only the certainty that he needed us to listen to him. After a long minute of silence and, as if he was scanning the past 20-plus years of his life, Micah said, "Since I was a little kid, I've had speech therapists, OTs, PTs, social workers, lots of teachers, counselors – all kinds of people in my life." He paused, grinned, and then continued, "I never thought I would have a lawyer too!" We burst out laughing as a family, the kind of laughter that heals, helps, and binds us together in hope and love. We agreed, "You are so right, Micah. We never knew that you'd have a lawyer or be headed to federal court."

Raising children with or without disabilities is a journey into the unknown. In our efforts to do our best to support Micah to be confident and self-determined, we stumbled head first into the great lessons of life. We – and Micah – learned that frustrations and closed doors are part of the journey and that they must be treated as detours, not dead ends.

Both Janice and Rich are authors, national speakers, and the proud parents of Micah and Emma. To read more about their publications and work, visit: www.danceofpartnership.com.

Janice Fialka, LMSW, ACSW and her husband are the proud parents of two adult children, Micah and Emma. She is a nationally-recognized social worker, author, and advocate on issues related to disability, inclusion, family-professional partnerships, and other related topics. Her website, www.danceofpartnership.com is a strong resource, and includes many of her essays and poems.

I Felt at Home

Micah Fialka-Feldman

with Barbara Schloss, Onondaga
Community Living, Onondaga, NY

Even when I lived in Michigan, I had heard about Syracuse University (SU). I knew they had a long and rich history of disability culture and that they trained their K through 12 teachers to work respectfully with ALL children. Then I got to go to Syracuse myself to speak at two big conferences in August 2011 that were sponsored by the School of Education. I just loved being at a place that really “got” inclusion and disability. I really felt at home. I wanted to figure out a way that I could move to Syracuse.

So while I was still at SU last August, I approached Julie Causton-Theoharis, one of the conference organizers and a professor in the school of education, to set up a meeting with her and George Theoharis (another professor). They told me to write a letter to Dean of Education, Doug Biklen, indicating my interest in working here. That was the beginning of many long conversations about how both Syracuse University and I could benefit by my coming here. After the close of the two conferences, I returned to Michigan where I have been living for my entire life.

I was determined to make Syracuse my new home and I wanted it to happen by January. Many people wondered if I could make that dream happen in just six months. I couldn't think about IF I could make it happen, I could only think about HOW I could make that happen.

Over the next six months, we had several conference calls and Skype calls to discuss how we could work together. I knew I had to build my circle of support in Syracuse right away. In November 2011, I saw Wendy Harbour, another education professor, at a conference and she told me that she had two job opportunities for me at Syracuse University. During that same month I returned to SU to speak in Julie Causton-Theoharis' education class. I was making more and more connections. It seemed definite that I would be moving here. I was excited.

Planning to Move

Once I had a job lined up and knew it was definite that I was moving to Syracuse, I posted a housing flyer on Facebook and sent it to my Syracuse email list--which was getting bigger every week! I found a place to live within walking distance of the university. I found someone whose roommate was moving out, and I contacted her. I was able to see the room and the house in November. Next, I had to find an agency to partner with. Jessica Bacon, PhD student at Syracuse, who is on the Onondaga Community Living (OCL) board, recommended OCL. I liked OCL because they believe in giving people choices and understand how to treat people with disabilities. They clearly believed in me as a person.

Arrival Time

I arrived in Syracuse on January 13, 2012 and have been working at S.U. as a graduate assistant. I help teach a class in the school of education with my friend Michelle Damiani, a doctoral student. I also work with a program called Peer-to-Peer, which links college students with other college students with disabilities. I am also helping with a campaign called “I Am Norm” at Liverpool High School and am part of a disability rights group, Beyond Compliance Coordinating Committee, and a sign language club, both at S.U.

Taking Care of Myself

So lots of things went great for me! I spoke up about wanting to move to Syracuse, and I made it happen, with help from family and friends. I got a job and a place to live. But sometimes I have to deal with things that are scary or unfamiliar, and I can get nervous about it. One thing that happened is when my housemate was moving back in with her parents, I had to



get a new housemate. I heard that the new housemate was moving in in the middle of the night, and I did not even really know him! I was nervous and scared about that. So I called my parents, and we came up with some things I could do, like go spend the night at another friend's house the day he moved in. I felt better once I had a plan. He did move in - not in the middle of the night - and it went fine. But I was glad that I had talked to someone about how I felt.

Living and working on my own, away from the place I lived my whole life, means I have to speak up for myself and do what I think is right for me. I take classes at Syracuse, as well as work there, and I had thought about taking a class in Disability Studies that sounded good. But then I found out there were over 100 students in the class! I knew that I did much better in smaller classes, so I chose a different one. I learned what works for me and that helps me make choices.

Over the years, I have opened many doors with the help of many people. It all started when I told my parents that I wanted to go in the same door at school as my friends in second grade. Opening this newest door in Syracuse happened in just six months. Not only do I feel at home, but now I am at home, in my new home in Syracuse.

Micah Fialka-Feldman is a teaching assistant at Syracuse University, student, national speaker, and pioneer who fights for disability-pride, justice, and inclusion. He is part of the first wave of adults with intellectual disabilities attending college and has been fully included in school and community.



My Brother's Journey: A Sibling's Perspective About College and What Comes Next

Emma Feldman

I love telling people that my parents, who reside in Michigan, live at least a day's car ride away from me (in Boston, MA) and my brother (in Syracuse, NY). This is a BIG deal. My brother and I visit each other in our different east-coast states without our parents. This is a BIG deal. My parents talk to my brother and me, at most, a few times a week. This is a BIG deal. Never could I have imagined that this would have happened. Instead, sometimes, having a brother with an intellectual disability, I grew up wondering things like: Who are Micah's real friends? Will he ever live on his own? How will he live a dignified life when most of society doesn't value him (and his label)?

In many ways, Micah had a picture-perfect inclusive K-12 education experience (this doesn't mean it was easy to create or actually perfect in execution) – he had a circle of friends, he ran on the Cross Country team, he was elected to homecoming court, he played on the local soccer team, he won the social studies department award. Inclusion has always been a foundational belief and practice in our family. It was an essential part of Micah's education experience and unlike some special education students, his inclusive journey continues well beyond grade school.



Siblings Emma and Micah.

However, it wasn't until he and I both went to college that something finally clicked for me as his sister. Inclusion became real and practical. Up until this point, inclusion made me feel good. In grade school, I felt safe knowing that Micah had things to do on the weekends, like his peers. It felt good knowing that Micah's peers cared about him. In the back of my mind, I had always wondered if people really wanted to be his friend (or did it just make them feel good)?

As we moved into college, inclusion felt more complex. I saw Micah being valued and I actually saw others grow in genuine ways as a result of having a relationship with him. I began to see people develop relationships with Micah because they saw the worth in who he was—not just because being his friend made them feel good. I saw Micah make decisions about *who* he wanted to be friends with. Suddenly everyone didn't have to be his friend; he and they could choose to become friends.

I saw Micah grow academically from the rigor of college. There were times when we were both taking similar courses and we'd talk about what we were both learning. He didn't "get" everything in the textbook (neither did I) – and that was okay. Not understanding everything is part of his disability. This does not mean that we lower our expectations; it means that we don't all have to understand everything.

College meant that Micah had to negotiate what his paid support-staff peers would do with him and unpack the tensions around "paying" a peer to support him. Inclusion in college meant that it wasn't always easy for him; the path was not paved for him – he had agency and self-determination in creating his future. He faced institutionalized discrimination; the college would not allow him to live in the dorms. He sued, eventually won, and spent his last semester living in the dorms. Micah's learning did not just happen in the courses he took. Like most college

students, he also grew leaps and bounds from the social interactions and genuine experiences outside the classroom. For example, as a result of his legal battle, Micah now knows lots of legal jargon. Inclusion meant he grew as a result of his (real) life experiences, not the simulated life experiences in a classroom.

Like me, Micah got to test the waters of "independence" (or at the very least, had the opportunity to see if he could make it without our parents) and develop the courage to continue to take risks. When he returned from a conference and told my parents that he wanted to move to Syracuse, this short statement seemed to reflect his entire history of being immersed in all aspects of life. As a result of his college journey, Micah had learned to create networks of support and advocate for his needs. Today, he wants to live away from our parents, create new communities, and be immersed in a community that he believes just "gets it" (disability, inclusion). He knew (and I knew) moving to a different state in an apartment with roommates without disabilities was not going to be easy. But he had the tools to make it successful.

I was excited when Micah moved to Syracuse in January 2012, but I was also worried. And as he continues on this exciting journey there are a few things I continue to worry about. Micah has lots to share with the world and especially educators. I hope that Syracuse finds a way for him to share his stories--what he has learned, not just about inclusive education but also about disability culture and disability pride. I think what makes his story unique is that inclusive education for him has been tied to learning more about his disability and becoming part of the disability justice movement. I know he can do more than be a go-to person at Syracuse--I think he can show his PowerPoint and teach segments of disability studies and education courses. This is going to take work on so many levels so



I'm excited that he's surrounded by people who care about him and totally "get" him.

My worry is that his just being in Syracuse will be enough for Micah, that he will be so happy to be around people who respect him that he (and his community) will forget that genuine respect comes from being challenged to continue to grow. I am afraid that we will get complacent. That's my fear, my nightmare. I hope that he is able to find ways to connect, grow, and learn from the Syracuse community. That he is able to develop, to be challenged on his PowerPoint and speaking skills. That he is able to learn more about social justice issues. That he is surrounded by people who challenge him--who tell him when he's talked too much about himself and when he hasn't asked enough questions about others--when his ego is gotten a bit too big (I say this with the most love in my heart). I hope people can continue to be real with him.

While supportive, nurturing communities that help people grow as people and as professionals is something many hope for, it is particularly important for people with disabilities. I think because the struggle to create inclusive communities is challenging, it is easier to be satisfied when we think we've finally done it (create the community); in reality, though, creating inclusive spaces and communities is always ongoing. Efforts to include Micah didn't stop once he was attending the neighborhood school, they didn't stop once he was playing on the local soccer team, and they didn't stop after he moved in the dorms at college. Micah continues to find more ways to make the world more inclusive for people with disabilities. It is process that forces him, our family, and our communities to grow and constantly strive to do better.

We're still figuring out this new chapter in his inclusive journey through life. I can tell Micah that it's not always perfect, that he shouldn't get complacent when it feels safe, and that he should continue to dream. And that he's got a community around him to help make the unimaginable imaginable and tangible for him.

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Building Self-determination by Designing PSE Programs as Empowering Settings

Seb Prohn

Self-determination is dynamic. It can grow or diminish depending on the environment (Abery, 1994; Wehmeyer & Garner, 2003). Environments that provide people with the opportunity to develop and demonstrate individual capacity, self-efficacy, and influence also foster self-determined attitudes and behaviors. When self-determined individuals emerge and flourish in empowering environments (Sprague & Hayes, 2001), they often improve their communities in the process. Beyond improving individual wellbeing, enhanced self-determination skills contribute, at least indirectly, to stronger communities. It is essential, therefore, to improve our understanding of what makes settings empowering and to provide people with intellectual disability (ID) access to environments that allow for empowerment.

Empowering Settings

Empowering settings are ones that contribute to individual and community development. Various settings, congregations, or community organizations—including colleges—can possess or cultivate the necessary qualities of an empowering setting. Maton (2008) provides a blueprint for empowering settings built upon six primary characteristics: group-based belief system, core activities, relational environment, opportunity role structure, staff, and setting maintenance (see Table 1). The empowering processes and outcomes associated with such environments for disadvantaged youth, recovering alcoholics, Afghani women, and other traditionally marginalized populations have been documented (Maton, 2008). Similar processes and outcomes are also evident in many postsecondary education programs (PSEs) for students with intellectual

disability (ID), but these programs have yet to be examined as 'empowering settings' using Maton's framework. This article will describe how college settings can exhibit Maton's key characteristics, highlighting features of a PSE program at Western Carolina University. If used with intention, Maton's characteristics can facilitate self-determination and help students with ID exercise control over their lives and strengthen their communities (Zimmerman, 1990).

The UP Program as an Empowering Setting

Western Carolina University's University Participant (UP) program (wcu.edu) is an on-campus living and learning experience for 18-25-year-old students with ID. UP participants and staff strive for all university experiences to intentionally attain two outcomes: independent living and employment. Many factors, such as parental support or strong social skills, contribute to achieving these outcomes. However, for all participants, increased self-determination is essential for achieving independent living and employment. Therefore, the UP program implements the organizational characteristics and procedures essential for fostering the "combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior" (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998). Exemplifying Maton's six characteristics, the UP program operates as an empowering setting to encourage self-determination as both a process and an outcome (see Table 1). Below, I describe how the UP program implements each of Maton's characteristics.