

Learning to Live and to Learn

BCC launches a college for the developmentally delayed.

BY GWEN DAVIS

TYPICALLY, WHEN developmentally delayed adults—some with IQs below 70, for example—turn 18, they are knocked out of the education system. There is little opportunity for educational advancement and a decent job. But a new program launched last month at Bellevue Community College seeks to change that. The Venture Program is the first of its kind to offer developmentally delayed students a chance to earn college credit.

"This program was but just a dream," says Cynthia Johnson, Venture's director. "Before it started, I did a lot of research around the nation and found practically nothing for these students, and that was what motivated me to do something about it."

Unlike BCC's other programs, Venture is not funded by the state. It relies on student

fees alone: approximately \$12,000 per student per year.

The students are not the easiest to work with, of course. The program seeks to address that through specialized teaching techniques, such as short, repetitive explanations of subjects, which include mathematics, reading, writing, and history.

"The kids love it," says Joan O'Neill of the Arc of King County (a nonprofit group serving, supporting, and advocating for people with developmental disabilities and their families), who has a daughter in the program. "Besides the academics, students develop very strong social connections—connections on a college level that they wouldn't have been able to develop anywhere else."

Choosing from a curriculum of 52 courses, students can earn an associate degree in what is called "essential studies." Besides traditional academic subjects, students take courses in social and life skills, including how to learn, conversation skills, and relationship basics. Workforce-skill courses introduce students to technology and the job-application process.

The ultimate goal of Venture, says O'Neill, is for career placement and life success. "But even more than that," she says, "this program is valuable because these students, despite their disabilities, love to learn. And in this program, they are finally able to do just that."

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