

Integrated Studies

A Student Perspective

By Morgan Huber

The foundation of Millersville University's mission lies in its core, or "EPIIC" values - Exploration, Professionalism, Public mission, Inclusion, Integrity, and Compassion. By adhering to these values, the Millersville community seeks to make learning and progress genuine, meaningful, and accessible. One of the unique ways the university does this is by making education inclusive to all through an initiative known as Integrated Studies.

Many hear of this program, but few know about its function and purpose. They see students they perceive as having special needs, but may not understand why they are on campus or what their goals are. Because of this lack of understanding, a variety of misconceptions, rumors, and discrimination run abound within the community. However, this small but powerful program seeks to do more than just be "Special Ed goes to college".

What is Integrated Studies?

Integrated Studies is an inclusive initiative for young adults with intellectual disabilities. Enrolled as full-time, non-degree-seeking students, the 28 current participants in the program attend classes and practice independent living by residing on campus and navigating life on their own. With the help of the staff team and their support coaches, students in Integrated Studies create individualized plans in order to take classes and pursue opportunities that fit their interests and career goals.

Integrated studies students have access to the same facilities, resources, and privileges as the majority student population. They may use the library, dining halls, and labs, and are encouraged to participate in clubs and activities outside of class. Upon completion of the program, graduates receive a certificate and can enter the workforce or, if they choose, may apply to enroll at Millersville or another school as a degree-seeking student.

In addition to academics, the university holds students in Integrated Studies to the same academic, financial, and behavioral standards. Participants in the program pay the same amount for tuition, housing, and technology fees. On top of that, however, students also pay an Educational Support fee each semester, which covers the additional services and support they receive through faculty, staff, and student success coaches.

Finances can be daunting for anyone considering college, but that should not discourage anyone from pursuing their goals. Students can apply for financial aid and scholarships such as Ruby's Rainbow and the National Down Syndrome Society's O'Neill Tabani Enrichment Fund, both of which support college students with Down Syndrome.

Another source of aid, the EPIIC Scholarship, exclusively serves Millersville students participating in the Integrated Studies program.

Integrated Studies is not unique to Millersville. Similar programs already exist in 49 of the 50 U.S. states at more than 300 colleges and universities.

Inclusion in Action

Initiatives like Integrated Studies strive to fight exclusion in post-secondary education. Aided by the Comprehensive Training Program (CPT), initiatives such as those at Millersville seek to empower students with intellectual disabilities by holding the same standards and valuing them as equal to any other college student.

Professors, as well as students not enrolled in Integrated Studies - referred to as “matriculating students” - may find it difficult to accommodate students with disabilities, whether that be conversing with students with disabilities or changing the structure of their curriculum. However, this is not the case. Students in Integrated Studies attend classes, study for tests and homework, and participate in clubs and organizations like anyone else. The only difference is they receive personalized support and coaching to supplement the standard college experience.

In addition to Dr. Thomas Neuville - a special education professor and the faculty advisor who spearheaded the program - Integrated Studies comprises three staff members - interim Director Courtney Wagner, Head Success Coach Jess Orcutt, and Administrative Assistant, Andie Petrillo - in addition to three graduate assistants. The team works together to keep the initiative running smoothly while maintaining that Millersville remains 100% inclusive, which is something they take great pride in.

As temporary Director of the program, Courtney Wagner works diligently to ensure that all students are supported and their needs are met. Although only employed at Millersville for a semester, she made astounding strides as a facilitator of inclusion and opportunity on campus. As she explains, Integrated Studies lays out the goals for students on four pillars - academic knowledge, social skills, independent living, and vocational experience. Based on these pillars, Integrated Studies also works with students to organize a plan based on their personal goals.

“We work with students to identify two areas of growth per semester,” says Wagner. “Together our students and staff figure out how to relate their individualized goals to skills they want or need to learn for the future.”

The Role of Coaches in Integrated Studies

Most Integrated Studies students also receive help from an Educational Support Coach - a matriculating student who supports them through their college experiences. Although the support coach position receives high interest from education and social work students, they can be of any major. Coaches may attend classes and club meetings with an assigned student, help them with homework, or provide advice or encouragement when navigating personal issues.

Currently, Integrated Studies employs 74 support coaches, with more being hired every day. With all students involved having their own schedules and goals regarding their relationship with their coaches, they may have as few or as many as they need.

“We find so much value in diversity and coaches from different backgrounds who all provide support and highlight their strengths in different ways,” says Andie Petrillo, administrative assistant for the team.

“Above all, we value commitment to inclusion, flexibility, and being able to communicate well with students,” explains Jess Orcutt, Head Success Coach of Integrated Studies.

With the help of Orcutt and their support coaches, students finalize their curriculum to suit their personal interests and career goals. Originally a 96-credit program, Integrated Studies extends to 120 credits, the same as any other program. Modeled after the Multidisciplinary Studies curriculum, students have the same general education requirements as their matriculating peers, in addition to three internships to gain vocational experience. Their primary focus of study - what matriculating students may refer to as their “major” - comprises two 18-credit core programs, formed by combining two existing minors. With inclusion in mind, Neuville designed the curriculum to give students the optimal academic experience.

The Student Perspective

Integrated Studies, formerly known as Career & Life Studies, has come a long way since forming a decade earlier with its first student, Daniel Castellanos. Castellanos entered Millersville in the fledgling program with a focus on theatre and entrepreneurship, hoping to pursue his dream of operating a dinner theater. Not only did he succeed in earning his certificate in 2016, but he also gave a powerful commencement speech. Through the connections and resources available to him at Millersville, Castellanos was able to work toward his goals and be prepared to live and work independently as an adult. Today, he works as a chef at Lancaster General Hospital. Without the Integrated Studies program, he likely would not have acquired the support he needed in order to reach his personal and career goals.

One of the Integrated Studies initiative’s most substantial contributions to the campus community is the Disability Pride festival. Organized by ADAPT, a student-run club focusing on inclusion and advocacy for people with disabilities, Disability Pride intends to spread awareness and promote acceptance toward people with disabilities and learning differences through films, lectures, and activities. Many of those who attend and help organize the event are enrolled as Integrated Studies students, making the festival authentically inclusive of their unique identities.

Although intellectual disabilities vary in how they impact young people, they also make each individual unique and capable of contributing to their community in their own way.

Before hearing about Integrated Studies at Millersville, **Faith Berney** thought she would never have the opportunity to go to college because of her disability. She has epilepsy, a disability that disturbs brain cell activity, making her vulnerable to seizures. Because of this condition, Berney struggles in some areas with her learning and has to be mindful of sleep, as lack of rest could cause seizure episodes. However, this obstacle in Berney’s life did not stop her from wanting to become a teacher.

“It was nerve-racking at first [applying to MU] because I didn’t know much about it,” says Berney. “I heard from a friend who went to Millersville that there was a program for students with disabilities. I love school and I wanted to become a teacher, and also make new friends, be educated and independent.”

Now a senior, Berney studies Early Childhood Education at Millersville and intends to work at a preschool or daycare after graduation. She claims that Integrated Studies helped her not only to work toward her career goals, but also to adapt to living on her own, managing her epilepsy symptoms, and improving her social relationships.

Admittedly an energetic and outgoing person, Berney loves to get involved and make new friends on campus, which she did through Expressions, a dance performance group at Millersville. As a sophomore, she successfully auditioned for the group and, through the support of her instructors and fellow dancers, made immense progress in her dance abilities. Above all, Berney enjoys helping out with fundraisers and attending social events, such as formal, with her fellow dancers. Starting out in Beginner Hip Hop, Berney looks forward to improving her skills in a new type of dance - Jazz!

“At first I was nervous performing on stage, but all the girls are nice and the coaches are extremely helpful,” says Berney. “When I started dancing, I realized this is what I really love.”

Berney is ecstatic about acquiring an internship at her dream job, a daycare at her local YWCA. She hopes to keep this position after graduation in May, as she would like to stay in the Lancaster area and remain close to her family in Leola.

“It’s going to be a lot of hard work, but I am really excited to work with the kids,” says Berney. “I want to be with my family and take care of my mental health, but also still be independent ... Integrated Studies helped me become more organized and self-sufficient, make progress in my life so I could do this job and be an independent adult.”

Berney reminds readers that in order to be successful while navigating challenges, “you will have to work hard, and it’s going to take time. Before anything else, you have to focus on yourself and not let others bother you.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF JENNA ZEUNER

Faith Berney poses in a photo shoot for Expressions, a dance group on campus of which she is a proud member.



MADelyn Jule / SNAPPER

Luke Davis sits down for a study session while enjoying the lovely weather outside of Stayer Hall.

Luke Davis is a sophomore at Millersville. Originally from Horsham, he studies Early Childhood and Special Education. After hearing about the program through a family friend, Davis applied to Integrated Studies at Millersville because of the opportunities the school offered and the reasonable distance from home.

Davis is quite the busy bee - he participates in a large number of clubs and organizations on campus, including CHAARG, Her Campus, Best Buddies, the Color of Teaching Mentoring Program, the Early Childhood Organization (ECHO), Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), Navigators, and the Conestoga Outdoor Club.

On the topic of his favorite aspects of getting involved, he says, "I especially like CHAARG and Her Campus, for example, because they give me the opportunity to sup-

port women's empowerment."

Davis began his field placement this semester, which he especially enjoys. Although only in his first semester of teaching in a classroom, he is ecstatic about applying the skills he learned through his classes and education-oriented clubs, while also being closer to home.

"Field placement is so much fun," says Davis, "I like interacting with students and being there for kids when they need help and support."

Although Luke Davis enjoys the experiences Integrated Studies and Millersville gave him, he also experienced some challenges while attending college. Davis speaks openly about his experience with ableism and discrimination on campus.

"People will look away or shut their doors or windows when I am in the dorms, and students last semester bullied me for the smallest things, like being barefoot outside during a fire drill," Davis explains. "Some are rude and disrespectful just because I do things differently."

Although Luke Davis had negative experiences, he focused mostly on the positive memories and lessons he gained through his time in college. He claims that Integrated Studies most of all helped him become more organized and prepared, while also learning to grow and be independent as an adult. Davis' goal in college is to either complete or leave the Integrated Studies program in order to pursue an Education degree, so he can help children grow and succeed. His words of wisdom to his students - "Make the most out of life and be yourself."

Antonia Little is a Sophomore studying Media Arts and Music Production. Before coming to Millersville as an Integrated Studies student, Little attended a community college near her hometown in the Washington D.C. area. The school had a similar program to Integrated Studies, except it was segregated, meaning that students with



OLIVIA HEILEMANN / SNAPPER

Antonia Little mans the DJ booth during her shift in the WIXQ studio.

disabilities attended classes and participated in activities separately from most students. Attending “high school-level” courses and the lack of inclusion disenchanted Little.

“I always wanted to attend college and go back to school,” says Little. “It would’ve been harder because I have a disability, meaning I would need accommodations and support. Most schools do not have that.”

Sometime after leaving the program at her community college, a friend informed her about Integrated Studies at Millersville. She jumped at the opportunity to attend inclusive classes and pursue her personal and career goals.

Antonia Little started volunteering as a disc jockey for the campus radio station, WIXQ, this past Fall. She hosts her own show at the station, which airs Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. on 91.7FM. In addition, Little helps out with the station by organizing the studio’s massive record and CD collection as part of her first on-campus internship for Integrated Studies.

“I like the fact it gives me the chance to explore new music and media,” says Little about working for WIXQ. “I can play my own music, from 2000s to today’s hits. I also like working behind the scenes by helping with archives, where I spend time with other DJs. I knew nobody in the radio station before, so it is great to meet new people and make friends doing something I love.”

Although only in her second year at Millersville, Little accomplished much so far through her internship, classes, and support from her coaches and the team at Integrated Studies.

“For me, it helps me become independent, so I am able to do things on my own,” explains Little.

As Antonia Little navigates her classes and internship, she anticipates one day becoming a successful DJ at a local radio station.



PHOTO COURTESY OF GEORGEA HALL
**Pascal Muganyizi hosts a segment of MUTV's
 "Plugged In," a show about all things nerd culture.**

Pascal Muganyizi is on the Autism spectrum, meaning his brain functions differently from most people. This, however, is his greatest strength. Muganyizi, a sophomore studying Communications, is very idealistic and passionate about what he does. His parents, who immigrated to the United States from Tanzania, value success and stability, which Muganyizi wants to achieve to make them proud. When one of his high school teachers told him about Integrated Studies at Millersville, he decided to use this program to help him pursue his dreams of being an independent adult and working in the film industry.

On campus, Muganyizi is involved in MUTV, the campus television station. He works behind the scenes with four of the station's five shows, where he often helps operate

the cameras and write stories. His proudest and most significant contribution to MUTV is his "What If?" segments for "Plugged In", where he asks viewers about potential scenarios where popular media get a reboot, remake, or adaptation.

Muganyizi's hard work never goes unnoticed. He is dedicated, passionate, and outgoing. He is always excited to make friends but finds himself distraught when others do not reciprocate due to prejudice.

"I wanted to do a project with another kid for a class, but he didn't want to work with me because I am autistic and have special needs," Muganyizi recalls, downtrodden. "I just wanted to get to know him."

Muganyizi expresses that students should be more accepting of those with special needs, as their being different and needing support does not make them bad people.

After graduating from Integrated Studies, Muganyizi hopes to live on his own and work at a television station in his hometown near Philadelphia. Through the support of the inclusive initiative, the staff, and his coaches and friends, he feels he can accomplish just that.

"I came [to Millersville] to make my family proud of me and get a good career and future," explains Muganyizi. "When I got here, I was happy to make friends. Millersville is like a second family to me. Integrated Studies helped me with everything - living on my own, teaching me how to get a job, managing time, and working on my goals and things I never did before."

In terms of how Integrated Studies and Millersville University could improve, he suggested offering culinary classes so students could learn how to cook.

"I want to live on my own, and knowing how to cook would definitely help me with that," he says.

What to Expect for the Future

Integrated Studies succeeds in providing opportunities to students, but all initiatives come with their own challenges. Figuring out how to support students in a fully immersive environment where they are on their own, while simultaneously ensuring that the environment is accepting and accommodating of them, can be a daunting obstacle.

“One of the biggest challenges is the self-determination of our students and coaches and ensuring their families have the same shared vision as our team,” explains Wagner. “We want students to be here for the right reasons and for everyone involved to be passionate about pursuing their goals. College is not for everyone, but everyone has the choice to be there and use the resources available to them to reach their goals.”

Because ableism and discrimination persist everywhere, students and staff also attempt to combat this by promoting acceptance and informing the community. Instead of making assumptions, people can educate themselves and be more open-minded when meeting new people. After all, inclusion and compassion are integral parts of the university’s EPIIC values.

“The more we can do to put people with disabilities in more valued roles on and off campus, the more we can dispel those negative stereotypes everywhere,” says Petrillo.

Another goal for Integrated Studies’ future include seeking national accreditation for the Integrated Studies initiative. Currently, no agency exists to accredit college-level programs for people with disabilities. By forming such an agency, inclusive education programs gain recognition and put opportunities for students at the forefront.

As Integrated Studies looks into the future, they see growth, compassion, and equality for all students. Although someone may have an intellectual or learning disability, that certainly should not stop them from pursuing their dreams. Through extra support and becoming independent, they transcend the expectations of those who came before them and set the standard for those who come after. Previously denied independence and agency, now is the time to give all the opportunity to become, as Neuville states, “agents of their own destiny.”

Integrated Studies By the Numbers

28 Students enrolled in Integrated Studies (2022-23)

6 New students enrolled for the Fall 2022 semester

7 Members on the Support Staff team

74 Support Coaches

45 Students enrolled in Integrated Studies since the program was established in 2016

47% Graduation Rate

65% Retention Rate