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Developmental disabilities won't shut door to college

VU program is first in Tennessee to offer courses, life skills

By Rachel Stults
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Like all of his friends, Matt Moore has been talking about going to college since he was a freshman in high school.

But there has never been a college program available in Tennessee for the Brentwood High School senior who has Down syndrome — until now.

Vanderbilt University has received a three-year grant to begin a post-secondary education program for students with developmental disabilities, the first of its kind in the state.

Officials at the university hope the program, aimed at providing not only continuing education but also career development, will pave the way for more like it across Tennessee, and will help shed stereotypes and raise awareness about the capabilities and talents of people with developmental disabilities.

The grant, which will give Vanderbilt \$175,000 a year for three years, comes from the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities.

Vanderbilt will accept its first students in January 2010, through the university's Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities.

"Students coming out of Tennessee high schools who have intellectual disabilities, they like to have options and they like options their peers have," said Wanda Willis, executive director of the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities. "That happens to include some form of continuing education — whereas, in the past, choices were often limited to opportunities in the community that were specifically for the person with the disability and not anybody else."

Each year, eight young adults will take a mix of undergraduate, life-skills and technical courses, as well as take part in campus extracurricular activities with Vanderbilt undergraduates. Although the program will begin non-residential, officials hope that students eventually may be able to live on campus.

Regular Vanderbilt University undergraduate courses will be offered, life-skills courses with internships will be provided, and technical courses will be available through the Tennessee Technology Centers. Tuition will be about \$10,000 a year, with the opportunity for scholarships.

"It's not going to be the same course of study for any student, just like it's not the same course of study for any other college student," said Elise McMillan, co-director of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities.

Tennessee falls behind when it comes to offering some kind of college program to students with disabilities. New York and Maryland have at least 15 programs, Massachusetts has 13 and California has at least 10, according to ThinkCollege.net, a Web site that offers information for students with disabilities about post-secondary education programs. Tennessee is one of 15 states that have no

programs.

Officials at Vanderbilt and the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities plan to work with other schools in the state to create more programs.

"Just like there's not one college that's right for every student, we need to see a number of programs in the state," McMillan said. "In many ways our state has made great strides in providing opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities, but there are some other areas where the opportunities are extremely limited. And this is one of those areas."

'Ahead of the game'

But the years spent brainstorming and planning for the inaugural program here should pay off, advocates say.

"I think in many ways Tennessee is going to be ahead of the game," Willis said. "We are going to have a model program that offers meaningful continuing education classes. And once we get a good model on the ground it's going to move very quickly because we know there's a market out there."

"I think we tend to underestimate people who have a disability — we tend to underestimate both their interest and ability to participate. This certainly, without a doubt, will be proven with this program."

Matt Moore is one of those students. The 19-year-old now has a part-time job at Publix, where he bags groceries — an opportunity that he and his mother, Sheila Moore, know is providing valuable life skills. But they both want to take the next step.

"I like college," Matt said. "I want to go to college and get job skills. I want to get a job at Vanderbilt children's hospital."

Sheila Moore, who also is the executive director of the Down Syndrome Association of Middle Tennessee, said Matt is already telling everybody he meets that he's going to college at Vanderbilt. Sometimes, his announcement draws puzzled looks. But she's hoping that will change.

"His dad and I aren't going to live forever. ... We hope this will be a program that will help him be as independent as possible," Moore said.

"It would be wonderful if Matthew could have a job where he's got his benefits right along with other employees, wonderful if he could live in an apartment, maybe with a roommate or maybe alone. I think it's going to be amazing what we're going to see of our kids and of our community."
