The “Autism Goes to College” forum convened at 1pm at Houston Hall. The forum was opened by Tony Rostain, M.D., M.A., who is Director of the Adult Developmental Disorders Section of Penn’s Department of Psychiatry at the School of Medicine, who welcomed the attendees:

Ellen Alford, Salem Community College
Joan Azarva, Transition Success
Andrea Coren, Arcadia University
Neila Douglas, The University of the Arts
Karen Eubank, The University of the Arts
Lynda Geller, New York University
Adriana Gonzales-Lopez, Arcadia University
Bridget Haines-Frank, The University of the Arts
Ed Hunter, The Art Institute of Philadelphia
Leah Jackson, New Jersey City University
Denise Jerman Liguori, Bergen Community College
Wendy Kohler, Temple University
Susan McCaffrey, Temple University—Ambler
Michel Miller, Drexel University
Pia Newman, Bureau of Autism Services, PA DPW
Martin Patwell, West Chester University
Marlena Reese, University of Pennsylvania
Mary Riggs Cohen, University of Pennsylvania
Tony Rostain, University of Pennsylvania
Tracey Rush, Swarthmore College
Lori, Shery, ASPEN
Raymond Smith, Bergen Community College
Jane Thierfeld-Brown, University of Connecticut Law School
Vincent Varrassi, Fairleigh Dickinson University
Joan Wittan, Educational Consultant
Deirdre Wright, University of Pennsylvania
Marge Zipin, Bucks County Community College
Forum attendees listened to a recently broadcast NPR story from the show “Morning Edition.” “An Autistic Student’s Journey to College” focused on a college freshman and his family. This student with Asperger Syndrome is transitioning to the University of Wisconsin. It was noted that he is very accepting of his diagnosis and has exceptional family support, making the transition less stressful than the typical student with ASD. The story can be found at http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94429083.

Dr. Rostain then asked the forum attendees to respond to the following questions.

1. **What are the major challenges and opportunities faced in your efforts to facilitate successful adaptation to college for students on the spectrum?**

   - First, it was generally agreed that these are students who have much to offer.
   - It can be difficult to determine how hard to challenge them or how to measure their sense of well-being.
   - Retention in higher education is another issue, particularly helping them through the early milestones (first week, month, year).
   - Social adaptation is a big challenge. It is still not clear how to best facilitate this process.
   - Behavior in the classroom can be perplexing to faculty.
   - These students are often limited by a lack of organizational skills and some don’t follow through with organizational plans.
   - Many don’t declare their disability, so it’s hard to get a sense of how they’re doing.
   - Often the parents don’t want to declare, but the students are OK with disclosing.
   - Michel Miller of Drexel said that RAs on her campus are being trained to identify students with ASD and “communicate up” without forcing to disclose.
   - Vince Varrassi noted that there are two levels of colleges: The autism-friendly college and the colleges that more discreetly support students with ASD. For instance, Fairleigh Dickinson offers the COMPASS Program (Community Promoting Academic and Social Success). Other colleges may not formally identify a program, but may run a program out of the college’s counseling center.
   - A major issue that attendees identified has to do with resource allocation. A central question is: “How do we document the disability in a way to help with resources?”
   - Tony Rostain drew an analogy to the LGBT advocacy movement 10 years ago as it relates to issues of stigma, inclusion and bullying. Progress regarding awareness and acceptance is coming along, but we may be five years or more away from reaching the point where the LGBT movement is today.

2. **What are some of the interventions utilized or characteristics of college students that lead to more successful outcomes?**

   - Students who are strong and open self-advocates fare better for the most part.
   - Helping students to create a network is a high priority.
   - Approaching through diversity, and broadening the definition of diversity, is important; e.g., Penn sponsors a Diversity Education Day.
   - Promoting success stories (not necessarily having gone through disability office) is another way to reduce stigma.
   - As part of pre-college transition planning, we could educate parents on how to deal with disclosure; maybe train counselors at the high school level to encourage students in getting comfortable with explaining what ASD is.
   - Offering an ongoing, small group orientation in addition to the general college orientation is helpful.
   - Marge Zipin shared that they offer a non-mandatory orientation for students with disabilities at BCCC; parents can attend, but their communication during groups is restricted so as to encourage the students to speak up and ask questions.
• Carnegie Mellon offers an enrichment program that guarantees somebody is checking in on the student every day, bringing peace of mind to parents.
• Joan Azaria of Transition Success offers a course at Gwynedd Mercy College called “Conquer College with LD” to assist students and parents who are going through the transition process.

SPECIAL GUESTS / PRESENTATIONS

Jane Thierfeld-Brown, Ed.D.
Director of Student Services
University of Connecticut School of Law

Jane’s main research interests are students with Asperger’s Syndrome in higher education and students with disabilities in high-stakes graduate programs. Jane has a book in progress, College Students on the Autism Spectrum, to be published later this year. Along with colleagues Lorraine Wolfe, Ph.D., and Lisa King, M.Ed., she recently launched a website, College Autism Spectrum (CAS). CAS is an independent organization of professionals whose purpose is to assist students with ASDs, and their families. In addition, CAS provides consulting to campuses and professionals.

Jane and Lorraine have launched a program at the University of Connecticut implementing a model of service that was piloted at the University of Minnesota: Strategic Education for Asperger Students (SEAD). One of the components of this program is a freshman seminar specifically for students on the spectrum. To get services delivered, SEAD offers a full-semester class for credit. Social skills training is part of the class. There is a liaison with the counseling department, which makes it easier for students to reach out for counseling.

Jane also shared information about an orientation offered for students with ASD before the transition. For example, special Saturday class can be offered so the students are comfortable in the environment—“it’s a wonderful bridge.”

Mary Riggs Cohen, Ph.D.
Director
Autism Spectrum Resource Center (Newtown, PA)

Mary is a licensed psychologist who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of Asperger Syndrome and other ASDs. She runs a social skills seminar for adults with ASD. In addition, she is a consultant who serves regional school districts and institutions of higher education.

Since the fall of 2003, Mary has been leading Penn’s social skills seminar, which has been taught year-round to more than 180 participants. It focuses on improving understanding of nonverbal communication, conversation skills, job interviewing skills, and developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. The three-hour seminar runs for 12 weeks, takes a cognitive behavioral approach and is very experiential. Recent social skills seminar enrollees are divided evenly between males and females and range in age from 18 to 51. More than 50% are college students or are in vocational settings.

Mary finds that these students want explicit guidelines. “Social coaches”—often, graduate students from premedical or social work programs—work with the seminar participants to provide an important peer-to-peer teaching element. The seminar focuses on teaching the “why” of social behavior using anthropology, psychology, etc.

Mary is developing a train-the-trainers model to disseminate her curriculum, which will be published in 2009. The forum attendees were enthusiastic about the idea but cautioned that marshalling the resources to offer the seminar on individual campuses could be challenging, especially for smaller institutions. It was suggested that a way to best serve a number of schools
would be to create a consortium that might be able to take advantage of a satellite implementation of the train-the-trainers social skills program.

**Lynda Geller, Ph.D.**  
Clinical Director, Asperger Institute  
New York University Child Study Center

Lynda spoke about a training program she’s developed at Bank Street College of Education in New York City. “College Coaching: Supporting the Individual with Asperger Syndrome and Related Conditions in Post-Secondary Education” will be offered January 5-9, 2009. She described this intensive week-long workshop as “preparing individuals to support students with AS and ASD in making the transition to higher education and developing the skills critical for adult independence.” It is designed for graduate students in education, social work and other human service fields; college advisors and higher education administrators, particularly those who work in student disability service offices; and, individuals in the mental health field, such as case managers, aides and vocational counselors. Cost of the full workshop is $500 and provides certification.

**ACTION STEPS**
- Dr. Rostain and Deirdre Wright will keep participants informed about a website devoted to autism and post-secondary education that is currently in development at Penn.
- Participants would like to see the development of an online forum for sharing information. This forum should be password protected to allow participants to share ideas and concerns in a safe and confidential format.
- Penn will investigate the possibility of sponsoring a day-long, hands-on workshop about students with ASD in post-secondary education; possible areas of interest to be explored:
  - How do we best advise students with ASD?
  - How do we link them to resources?
  - Getting students with ASD ready for the transition to college.
  - Getting “neurotypical” students ready to accept and coach students with ASD.
  - Addressing the needs of families.

**Next meeting topics:** Self-advocacy; linking students to social outlets (anime club, bowling club, sports talk, etc.).