2011 Autism Program Follow-up Study:
Brief Report on Autism Program Alumni

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INTRODUCTION

As part of ongoing improvement efforts, the Ivymount School undertook an alumni follow-up study during the 2010-11 academic year in order to evaluate how well the school prepares its students for post-school life. This document summarizes a subset of these findings, focusing exclusively on interview responses from the parents of Autism Program alumni. Topics covered as part of the 2011 Autism Program Alumni Follow-up Study include employment experience, post-secondary education, transportation issues, living arrangements, social and community life, and transition to post-school life.¹

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

All participants in the 2011 Autism Program Follow-up Study were parents of Autism Program alumni who either completed the Autism Program at age 21 or transferred out of the Autism Program between the ages of 18-21.

The Director and Transition Coordinator for the Autism Program identified the names and contact information for the 18 alumni who met these criteria. The parents of nine of these alumni (or 50% of eligible participants) participated in the 2011 study. Reasons the remaining nine did not participate included lack of current contact information, failure to respond, or inability to schedule an interview during the time the study was active.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

An interview protocol was developed to address alumni’s reasons for leaving the Autism Program, employment experiences, post-secondary education, transportation issues, living arrangements, social and community life, and overall quality of transition to post-school life. Questions also addressed parents’ perceptions of how well the Autism Program helped prepare alumni in each of these domains. Between January-March of 2011, nine telephone interviews were conducted with parents of alumni. Interviews were transcribed as they were being conducted.

Interview data included both quantitative data (responses to Likert-type scales) and qualitative data (open-ended responses). Emerging themes were identified as those themes mentioned by two or more parents.

RESULTS

LEAVING IVYMOUNT

Three Autism Program alumni remained in the program until they “aged out” (i.e., turned 21 and reached the end of their educational entitlement), and six either transferred to another non-public

¹ For a copy of the full-length report, contact Ivymount School.
school that serves as a feeder for an adult services program or transferred to a public school in closer proximity to where the family lived.

**EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES**

**Current Employment** All nine Autism Program alumni are currently employed, eight in a volunteer capacity with support from a job coach, and one with a combination of both paid and volunteer positions supported by a job coach.

**Numbers of Hours Worked** None of the alumni included in this study worked full-time (30-40 hours per week). Most worked between 10-29 hours per week.

**Job Descriptions** Most jobs currently and/or recently held by alumni are entry-level and require limited skill sets. Job tasks and locations vary significantly, however, with some jobs involving physical tasks and some involving desk and/or office work.

**Funding** Of the six alumni who are currently employed and over the age of 21 (i.e., no longer eligible for employment support as part of their educational entitlement), all receive state funding to support their participation in a vocational support program of some kind.

**Satisfaction with Current Employment Situation** Most alumni appear to be satisfied with their current employment situations. Breakdowns were as follows:

- “very satisfied” (n=7)
- “somewhat satisfied” (n=1)
- “unsure” (n=1)

Parents were asked to elaborate on their responses, and five themes emerged in terms of alumni satisfaction/dissatisfaction with current employment situations.

- “Goodness of fit” between participants and their job placements (n=5)
- Feeling of membership within the workplace community (n=4)
- Enthusiasm about current job placement (n=3)
- Lack of behavioral issues when working (n=3)
- Lack of money awareness and/or satisfaction with minimal/no income (n=2)

**Preparation by the Autism Program for Employment** All parents felt that the Autism Program had done a good job of preparing alumni for post-school employment. Parents reported that the program had prepared alumni:

- “very well” (n=6)
- “moderately well” (n=3)

Parents were asked to elaborate on their responses, and five themes emerged in terms of how well the Autism Program prepared alumni for post-school employment.

- Availability of a wide range of employment experiences (n=4)
- Provision of individualized supports to ensure workplace success (n=3)
- Cultivation of desired workplace behaviors (n=2)
• High expectations of students (n=2)
• Overall high quality of program (n=2)

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Enrollment in Post-Secondary Education Of the six Autism Program alumni who are no longer receiving services under their education entitlement, two were currently enrolled or had previously been enrolled in an post-secondary education program of some kind.

Type of Post-Secondary Education Of the two alumni who are currently enrolled or have previously been enrolled in a post-secondary education program of some kind, both have taken advantage of post-secondary education opportunities tailored to meet the job training and/or functional academic needs of adults with disabilities.

Funding Both alumni received funding from the state or other sources to offset tuition costs.

Satisfaction with Post-Secondary Education Experiences Both alumni were “very satisfied” with their post-secondary education experiences.

Preparation by the Autism Program for Post-Secondary Education Parents of both alumni who are currently enrolled or have previously been enrolled in an adult education program or courses felt that Ivymount had prepared them “very well.”

TRANSPORTATION

Parents of most alumni reported that transportation was “not an issue” (n=8). Alumni commonly use transportation affiliated with programs (e.g., door-to-door vans) and/or public transportation (n=2). Almost all require 1:1 support when traveling (n=6).

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

Types of Living Arrangements Although most alumni currently live with one or both parents (n=7), a few live in supported living arrangements with one or more roommates in a house or apartment (n=2). No alumni were reported to be living in either group homes or semi-independent living facilities at this time.

Funding for Residential Support Of the two alumni who do not currently live with their parents, both receive funding for residential support.

Waitlist to Receive Funding for Residential Support Of the seven alumni living with parents, more than half (n=4) are on a waitlist to receive funding for residential support. Several parents expressed frustration with the “interminable wait.”

Respite Care Four Autism Program alumni currently receive respite care.
Satisfaction with Current Living Arrangements As reported by their parents, the majority of alumni are “very satisfied” with their current living arrangements. Responses were as follows:

- “very satisfied” (n=7)
- “somewhat satisfied” (n=1)
- “somewhat dissatisfied” (n=1)

Parents were asked to elaborate on their responses, and four themes emerged in terms of alumni satisfaction/dissatisfaction with current living arrangements.

- Contentment with current living arrangements (n=5)
- Gets along with members of household and/or feels a sense of “belonging” (n=4)
- Home environment tailored to individual needs and preferences (n=4)
- Parental dissatisfaction with alumni’s current living arrangements (n=2)

Preparation by the Autism Program for Independent Living In terms of independent living (e.g., hygiene, grooming and household chores), most but not all parents felt that the Autism Program had done a good job preparing alumni. Breakdowns were as follows:

- “very well” (n=4)
- “moderately well” (n=3)
- “not very well” (n=1)
- “not sure” (n=1)

Parents were asked to elaborate on their responses, and five themes emerged in terms of how well the Autism Program had prepared alumni for independent living.

- Taught critical independent living skills (n=5)
- Importance of the Ivymount “apartment” for practicing skills (n=5)
- Overall high quality of the program (n=3)
- Provided a nurturing environment (n=3)
- Inadequacy of curriculum/instruction (n=2)

SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY LIFE

Opportunities for Structured Social Interaction Six alumni have regular opportunities for structured social interaction with peers, but the remaining three do not. Frequency of engagement in structured social activities ranges from multiple times each week to once per month or less.

Types of Activities Opportunities for structured social interaction take a variety of forms. Most commonly, alumni participate in organized sports groups for individuals with disabilities or social clubs, either religious or secular, offering regular get-togethers and community outings for individuals with disabilities.

Integrated versus Segregated Opportunities Almost all of the structured social activities in which alumni participate are specifically designed for adults with disabilities, although one parent described an integrated religious youth group.

Opportunities for Unstructured Social Interaction None of the alumni included in this study have regular opportunities for unstructured social interaction with peers. All nine have regular
opportunities for unstructured social interaction with family members, however, often with extended family and/or adult siblings. One parent also mentioned regular opportunities for unstructured social interaction with respite care providers.

Interviewees were asked to describe alumni’s unstructured social interaction, and one theme emerged: the need for parental facilitation.

Satisfaction with Social and Community Life Although most parents reported that alumni were satisfied with their social and community life, several were unsure how to gauge this. The breakdown was as follows:

- “very satisfied” (n=4)
- “somewhat satisfied” (n=2)
- “not sure” (n=3)

Interviewees were asked to elaborate on their responses, and four themes emerged in terms of alumni satisfaction/dissatisfaction with social and community life.

- Content with minimal social interaction (n=6)
- Social challenges related to ASD (n=4)
- Enjoys opportunities for social interaction (n=4)
- Enjoys outings and activities (regardless of social content) (n=3)

Preparation by the Autism Program for Social and Community Life In terms of social and community life, the majority of parents felt that the Autism Program had prepared alumni well, but several were unsure. The breakdown was as follows:

- “very well” (n=6)
- “not sure” (n=3)

Parents were asked to elaborate on their responses, and four themes emerged in terms of how well the Autism Program had prepared alumni for social and community life.

- Exposure to a variety of opportunities for social interaction (n=7)
- Overall high quality of social skills program (n=5)
- Development of social and communication skills (n=4)
  - Recognition that Autism Program did a good job in spite of alumni’s ongoing challenges relating to social and community life (n=4)

TRANSITION TO POST-SCHOOL LIFE

Overall Quality of Post-School Life The majority of parents agreed that alumni’s post-school life was excellent or good. The breakdown was as follows:

- “excellent” (n=3)
- “good” (n=5)
- “not sure” (n=1)

Parents were asked to elaborate on their responses, and five themes emerged in terms of alumni’s overall quality of post-school life.

- Overall high quality of post-school life (n=5)
- Comfortable life tailored to alumni’s needs (n=3)
- Seems happy (n=3)
- Too much unoccupied time (n=2)
- Limitations relating to autism spectrum disorders (n=2)

**Changes in Support Needs Over Past Five Years** Most parents reported that alumni required the same amount of support as five years ago, although some reported changes in support needs. Breakdowns were as follows:

- “much less support” (n=1)
- “somewhat less support” (n=2)
- “about the same support” (n=5)
- “much more support” (n=1)

**Most Significant Post-School Challenges** Parents were asked to identify what they perceived to be the most significant post-school challenges faced by alumni, and six themes emerged.

- Too much unoccupied time (n=4)
- Insufficient services/funding (n=3)
- Lack of autonomy and concerns about safety (n=3)
- Lack of communication skills (n=2)
- Mental health, behavioral, medical issues (n=2)
- Challenge to parents of supporting alumni’s needs (n=2)

**Preparation by the Autism Program for Transition to Post-School Life** Although the majority of parents reported that the Autism Program had done a good job preparing alumni for the transition to post-school life, not all agreed. Breakdowns were as follows:

- “very well” (n=5)
- “reasonably well” (n=2)
- “not very well” (n=1)
- “not sure” (n=1)

Interviewees were asked to elaborate on their responses, and one theme emerged in terms of how well the Autism Program prepared alumni overall for post-school life: high quality curriculum (n=6).

**Key Skills Learned in the Autism Program** Parents were asked to identify key skills alumni acquired while in the Autism Program, and the most commonly mentioned skills were the following:

- Vocational skills and experiences (including typing and computer skills, following directions, a strong work ethic, and exposure to a wide range of job sites) (n=4)
- Independent living skills (including grooming and hygiene, shoe tying, and toilet training) (n=4)
- Communication skills (including use of voice output devices) (n=4)
- Use of structural supports (including visual schedules and reward systems) (n=4)
- Behavior management and emotion regulation (n=3)
- Academic skills (especially functional reading) (n=2)
- Comfort being in the community (n=2)
Preparation by the Autism Program of Families for Transition to Post-School Life

Parents were for the most part satisfied with how well the Autism Program had prepared families for transition to post-school life. Breakdowns were as follows:

- “very well” (n=4)
- “reasonably well” (n=3)
- “not very well” (n=1)
- “not sure” (n=1)

Parents were asked to elaborate on their responses, and five themes emerged in terms of how well the Autism Program prepared families for transition to post-school life.

- Comprehensive information and/or transition support (n=4)
- Supportive environment for families (n=3)
- Vulnerability/anxiety on part of families in terms of transition process (n=3)
- Need for improved transition supports (n=3)
- Appropriately counseled parents to transfer to another program (n=2)

RECOMMENDATIONS

IMPROVING TRANSITION TO POST-SCHOOL LIFE

Most parents offered one or more recommendations for how the Autism Program could improve students’ transition to post-school life. Recommendations included:

- Ongoing transition counseling for students and their families (n=2)
- More job sites spanning a wider range of vocational options (n=2)
- More opportunities for students to participate in the outside community (n=2)
- Mentor program utilizing parents who have been through the transition process (n=1)
- More rigorous academic program (n=1)

PROVISION OF ADULT SERVICES BY IVYMOUNT

Most parents said that they would like to see Ivymount provide one or more types of adult services for Autism Program alumni. Parents made the following recommendations:

- Develop an adult day program that includes a combination of continuing education and employment supports (n=6)
- Provide some type of residential programming (e.g., supported living and/or group homes) (n=5)
- Sponsor weekend activities and/or aftercare during the week (n=3)
- Sponsor alumni gatherings and/or community activities (n=2)
- Offer adult programming in other parts of the DC metro region (n=2)
- Offer respite care (including extended respite care) (n=1)

Parents frequently remarked on their confidence in the high quality programming Ivymount is known for, and made comments such as “If Ivymount offered residential, we’d be there in a
CONCLUDING REMARKS

Findings from this study indicate that most Autism Program alumni live busy, satisfying lives, yet continue to experience significant challenges. Most are employed, yet the majority work as volunteers, and most work less than full time. A few have received some sort of adult education, all from programs offering functional academic and job readiness training for young adults with disabilities. Most continue to live at home, and are content doing so, but for those who seek residential placements, waitlists are long. Many participate regularly in structured opportunities for social interaction with peers, yet none “hang out” with peers independently of structured activities, and most lack adequate opportunities and/or social skills for developing and sustaining meaningful relationships. While overall satisfaction with post-school life tends to be high, concerns relating to too much unstructured time, physical safety, insufficient post-school services and funding remain. Several parents also felt unqualified to gauge alumni’s social satisfaction levels.

Findings indicate that the Autism Program did a good job of preparing most alumni for post-school life. Parents consistently gave programs high marks for quality of curriculum, levels of staff expertise, and a caring environment that cultivates students’ autonomy and self-esteem.

Parents generated a number of recommendations for improving Ivymount’s support for Autism Program alumni’s transition to post-school life. They also expressed confidence in the quality of programming offered by Ivymount, and wished to see Ivymount expand its services to include some form of adult day services/supported work program and/or residential services for adults with autism.

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