

Whitney J. Smith Tackles ASD at the CCs


It's long been a concern for post-secondary students with disabilities, as the National Council on Disability wrote in 1993, that "Resources are often inadequate and disconnected. The type, range, availability of, and terms related to services are often widely discrepant and poorly integrated while access to mentors or technological training is either limited or non-existent."

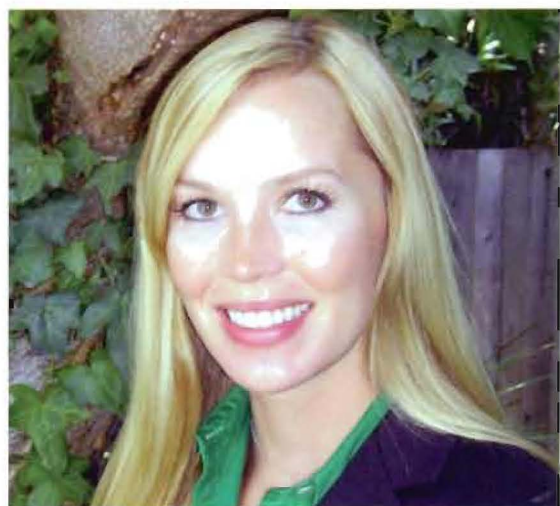
Doctoral candidate Whitney J. Smith (Department of Education, Special Education, Disability, and Risk Studies emphasis) is hoping to help with this problem. In June 2010 Smith was named the recipient of the Office of the President Community College Research Assistantship for her research, and what's more research into practice, for as she says, "I found a tremendous need there, as an increasing number of students are coming to college with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and being met with the traditional services given to all students. Since those services aren't individualized to the needs of students with ASD, they are often not sufficient for them to succeed, especially with socialization issues."

Smith's research focus is both clear and challenging: "Identifying a range of supports (self-advocacy, academic, social, and behavioral skills) for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders to attend community college as well as measures that community college faculty can input into their curriculum across different disciplines to promote success of students with disabilities."

It's little surprise that Smith is so driven to help those with autism, as she first grew interested in the topic as an undergraduate at UCSB taking Bob Koegel's Intro to Autism class. Smith earned her B.S. in Psychology with an Applied Psychology minor in 2007, and then worked as the clinic coordinator for the Koegel Autism Center. She applied for graduate work at the Center and the Gevirtz School because she claims, "I think PRT

(pivotal response treatment) is the best method out there for helping children with autism, so I wanted to research and apply the naturalistic behavioral intervention with adults with ASD." While she plans a range of areas to explore, including establishing peer support models and writing a manual to help college students with ASD, she also will continue her master's research on improving social conversation in young adults with Asperger's Syndrome using video feedback. She says, "This intervention is aimed at increasing initiations in the form of question-asking, which provides for important collateral effects such as friendship development and the ability to self-advocate for services they need."

Luckily, these students also have Smith on their side. She admits, "Especially with the budget cuts and the focus on assisting younger children with autism, there's a lack of resources for college-aged people with ASD. What's more there's a paucity of research in this area, so researchers need to investigate what the most effective types of accommodations are." Smith is certainly at the forefront of that effort. 



Doctoral candidate Whitney J. Smith is helping students with autism spectrum disorders transition to community college.