Autism/Asperger Initiative
at Mercyhurst University
Introduction

The Autism/Asperger Initiative at Mercyhurst (AIM) is designed for students who, while exhibiting superior intellectual abilities, face challenges in executive functioning and social interactions. AIM provides special services for students diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism. After more than 20 years of providing superior services to students with learning and sensory disabilities through its Learning Differences Program, Mercyhurst University in 2008 developed a new program to meet the unique needs of the growing population of college students on the autism spectrum.

The program has been widely recognized. It’s been featured in media outlets including the Chronicle of Higher Education, Autism Asperger Digest, C-Span, Forbes magazine and many regional newspapers.

In late 2012, AIM’s director was invited and testified on autism before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. AIM was featured as a model program at Pennsylvania’s Inaugural Conference on Post-Secondary Programs for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, and was ranked third in the country among “Impressive Special College Programs for Students with Autism.”
During summer 2014, AIM was selected to take part in a symposium on ASD in Higher Education at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). AIM Director Brad McGarry and representatives of six other leading college programs for students with autism collaborated on a manual for colleges wanting to start autism programs.

It is estimated that 1 in every 100 college applicants is diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. With support from AIM’s professional staff, our students on the spectrum have succeeded both academically and socially. Student input has helped shape the program; some students participate with faculty and staff on an advisory board to identify what students with ASD require to succeed on this campus and what components should be implemented in the program to ensure success.

The Learning Differences Program, founded in 1986, was the first of its kind in Pennsylvania and one of only a handful of programs across the country at that time. AIM students utilize and benefit from many services already developed for the Learning Differences Program.
Program Highlights

The AIM Program supports students in all areas of the college experience, including campus life as well as class work. Students are evaluated in key domains that are essential to higher education and vocational success. These A.I.S.E domains explore functioning in Academic, Independent, Social and Emotional areas. Students enrolling in AIM pay an annual fee that covers services in academic, social and counseling support as needed.

Academic Support

• Individualized course planning based on strengths and learning styles

• Weekly meetings with program academic counselors to monitor academic progress and executive functioning

• Availability of assistive technology (such as Kurzweil Personal Reader and Dragon Naturally Speaking)

• Access to peer and graduate-level tutors, note takers and other accommodations provided by the Learning Differences Office

• Testing accommodations

• Collaboration with faculty to address special learning needs

• Priority registration to ensure that class schedules fit personal schedules

• Access to all accommodation for which students qualify under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as amended
Social Support
- Priority for specialized housing arrangement
- Individualized Social Skills Training Modules
- Peer Mentoring Program
- Optional meal gatherings to encourage socialization in dining hall
- Group events and outings on- and off-campus
- Development of student-centered individualized behavior plans
- Collaboration with faculty/staff to address specific behavioral needs

Counseling Support
- On-site social skills group
- Referral to Mercyhurst Counseling Center as needed
- Facilitation of working relationships with Erie area psychiatrists and Autism specialists

Vocational Support
- AIM Career Path Program offers vocational resources that include:
  - Vocational Skill Development, A Career Path Experience, Job Shadowing and assistance in obtaining internships and vocational opportunities.
  - Access to computer and other resources through the Career Development Center.
  - Community and National Resources specializes in employment services for individuals on the Autism Spectrum.
Academic Requirements

AIM provides special services for students diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism. Early application is encouraged. Typically the program is full by April 1.

To apply to AIM, students must:
- Complete the standard Mercyhurst University application, available online at apply.mercyhurst.edu
- Complete an additional application to the AIM Program, available at mercyhurst.edu/aim
- Submit recent psychological assessment
- Submit AIM Teacher Recommendation Form

To apply to Foundations, students must:
- Complete the Foundations Application, available at mercyhurst.edu/foundations
- Complete Summer Course Registration Form
- Complete KaleidAScope Assessment Survey
- Complete Foundations Student Health Record
- Submit recent psychological assessment
- Submit high school transcript

Mercyhurst’s Old Main bathed in blue light to mark World Autism Awareness Day
The Foundations Program

Mercyhurst University offers a three-week summer experience to help potential students determine whether they are ready for the demands of college life.

The Foundations Program was designed for students with Asperger Syndrome or High Functioning Autism who have the academic ability to succeed in college yet face significant limitations in their social and organizational skills. To enroll in Foundations, students must have at least completed the junior year of high school.

The students live in a Mercyhurst residence hall, eat in the college cafeteria and interact with fellow students in a variety of social activities and settings. In addition, they enroll in a three-credit college course taught by a faculty member who has experience working with and advocating for students on the autism spectrum. The students also participate in the College 101 Series and the Mini Lecture Series that assist in orienting them to college offices and expose the participants to different faculty and lecture styles.

The Foundations Program experience allows students to learn valuable study skills, social interactions and independent living skills while adjusting to the rigor of college-level academics. Students who complete the Foundations Program may choose to apply to Mercyhurst University and its AIM Program or may transfer the college credits to another college.

The cost of the Foundations Program includes room and board for three weeks, an extensive living skills curriculum and a three-credit college course. Applications must be completed by March 1 and submitted directly to the AIM Office in 313B in Old Main.
Brad McGarry is the Director for the Autism/Asperger Initiative at Mercyhurst (AIM). An adjunct faculty member in the Mercyhurst Psychology Department since 2004, he earned a master’s certificate in special education with a concentration in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) in 2012 and a master’s degree in community counseling in 1999. He has taught and presented on Autism and disabilities in venues across the country. Brad is married with five boys and presents and advocates for his oldest son, Connor, who is living with Angelman Syndrome and another rare genetic disorder.

Conquer The Canyon

Once again, Mercyhurst will offer a “Conquer the Canyon with AIM” adventure in May 2015. Conquer the Canyon with AIM provides a life-altering experience for AIM students, friends and other interested participants who will explore parts of Arizona and the Grand Canyon that very few ever get to see. At the same time, the trip raises awareness about the program at Mercyhurst and the need for similar programs across the country. Take a hike in one of the most spectacular places on the planet – and help provide a college education and career for a student on the spectrum. How many people can say they accomplished that by just going for a walk?

Learn more at conquerthecanyon.com