



AUTISM INITIATIVE

at Mercyhurst University



MERCYHURST
UNIVERSITY



Introduction

In 2008, Mercyhurst introduced the Autism Initiative at Mercyhurst (AIM) to meet the unique needs of the growing population of college students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). The AIM Program focuses on building a foundation of self-advocacy, social skills, and sound academic progress. AIM has continuously grown and evolved to become an international leader in higher education programming focused on the needs of students on the autism spectrum.

The AIM Program equally emphasizes academic, independence, social, emotional and vocational domains and provides trained professionals to support student success in each of these domains. The goal for students is to develop academically and socially while improving skills to live independently and obtain sustainable and meaningful employment after graduation.

It is estimated that one in every 100 college applicants is diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. The professional guidance and skills of the AIM staff combined with valuable student input have shaped the AIM program, allowing students on the spectrum to succeed both academically and socially.

The AIM Program has been featured in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, NBC's *TODAY.com*, TEDxErie, *This Business of Autism*, Mesh Omnimedia, *Forbes Magazine*, *National Catholic Reporter*, *Thinking Person's Guide to Autism*, C-SPAN, Kompas Indonesia, United Nations TV, MTV Music Television, *Autism/Asperger Digest*, *Autism Parenting Magazine*, and many regional and national publications.

The distinctions of our innovative program model and talented staff include:

- In 2012, AIM staff testified on behalf of autism before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.
- In 2014, AIM staff contributed to the published guide “Emerging Practice for Supporting Students on the Autism Spectrum in Higher Education.”
- In 2015, AIM was featured at TEDxErie with “Creating Meaningful Careers for Adults with Autism.”
- In 2017, AIM’s program director was a finalist for the Autism Connection of PA’s Temple Grandin Award.
- AIM has been ranked 3rd in the country among “Impressive Special College Programs for Students with Autism” and “Best Value Colleges for Students with Autism.”
- In 2018, an AIM student was selected to speak at the United Nations on International Autism Awareness Day and was featured on MTVU.
- In 2018, the AIM director received the Milestones Autism Resources Professional Excellence Award.
- In 2018, the AIM program was featured in *This Business of Autism*, the internationally acclaimed and award-winning documentary from Mesh OmniMedia.



Enhanced Services Offered by the AIM Program

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, Independence, Social and Emotional areas. Students enrolling in AIM pay an annual fee that covers services in academic, social and counseling support as needed.

- Weekly AISE domain assessment meetings
- Peer Mentor programming
- Priority for specialized housing arrangement
- Standardized social opportunities
- Individualized social skills training
- Independence skill development
- Assessment to assist in understanding of learner-type and category of autistic thinking
- Access to optional meal gatherings to encourage socialization in the dining hall
- Development of student-centered individualized behavior plans
- Access to staff certified in PEERS® (Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills) for Young Adults
- Academic support through Autism Support Networking (ASN) above and beyond the standard academic supports at the university
- Access to the AIM Career Path Program and vocational resources that include:
 - Vocational skill development
 - Job Shadowing
 - Vocational Exploration Experience – access to meet with top business and autism employment initiatives
 - Assistance in obtaining internships and vocational opportunities
 - Access to community and national resources that specialize in employment services for individuals on the Autism Spectrum
- Access to participate in a variety of experiential adventures that serve to broaden awareness of both the outer world and the inner self while raising awareness for autism-related causes. Two highlighted opportunities are Conquer the Canyon with AIM and Raise the Roof for Autism.

How to Apply

To apply to AIM, students must:

- Complete the standard Mercyhurst University application, available online at apply.mercyhurst.edu and be accepted to Mercyhurst University.
- After being accepted to Mercyhurst University, complete an additional application to the AIM Program, available at mercyhurst.edu/aim.
- Provide documentation from a licensed professional.
- Participate in an on-campus interview.
- Deadline for AIM applications: February 1, 2022.



Beyond the Bounds of the Mercyhurst Main Campus

Through affiliation with the AIM program students have the opportunity to participate in a variety of experiential adventures that serve to broaden their awareness of both the outer world and their inner self. Two highlighted opportunities are:

Raise the Roof for Autism

Conquer the Canyon



The CREATE Summer Program:

College Readiness Experience for Autism Training Excellence

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

Through this well-rounded experiential program, students gain exposure and experience in every facet of college life. The CREATE experience includes:

- Three-week College Readiness Assessment
- Residential life in a Mercyhurst residence hall
- Extensive social skills curriculum
- Dining in the campus dining hall
- Interacting both socially and academically with fellow students in a variety of settings
- Access to social environments to practice skills learned on campus and in the program
- Enrollment and participation in a three-credit college course taught by a Mercyhurst faculty member who has experience working with and advocating for students on the autism spectrum
- Participation in our specialized College 101 series expressly designed for the needs of students on the autism spectrum. This series provides exposure to the different components of a college campus such as residence life, registrar, financial aid, health center, etc.
- Participation in our Mini Lecture Series presented by a panel of Mercyhurst faculty on a broad range of topics designed to intrigue a variety of interests. This series provides exposure to different lecture styles and fields of academic study.
- Opportunity to learn valuable study skills, develop / enhance social interactions, and hone independent living skills while adjusting to the rigor of college-level academics.



Mercyhurst's Old Main bathed in blue light to mark World Autism Awareness Day



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