



A Reach Unlimited Inc. instructor works with Derek, right, to improve his math skills at the Learning Activity Center.

By Kimberly Stauffer

Serving an oft-overlooked community, Lone Star College-CyFair's College of Careers and Development for Exceptional Learners offers developmentally disabled students the opportunity to enroll and learn new jobs skills in the college environment.

College officials partnered with Reach Unlimited Inc., an organization dedicated to serving developmentally and physically disabled adults, and started the program in 2006 with four students. Now more than 20 students are enrolled in certification programs like Customer Service and Office Skills.

"There is such a large need, and there's really not much in the area for students with disabilities for learning opportunities," said Noemi Jenkins, program manager.

Before students enter a program, they must complete a slate of core courses including Social Skills, College 101 and Study Skills. A common trait among developmentally disabled adults is a lack of social skills, which can be detrimental in the workforce. Jenkins said the college concentrates on preparing students for an independent life.

"These students are very committed. If you tell them to be there at a certain time, they are there on time," Jenkins said. "All these students are looking for is meaningful employment."

Lauren Black, associate executive director of Reach Unlimited Inc.'s Learning Activity Center, said college and workforce programs are necessary for adults to achieve their social and employment goals. The facility serves approximately 250 adults ranging from almost ready to enter LSC-CyFair's college program to those who need help with basic needs. After the adults are aged out of public school education at 22, they often need further help to reach a fourth grade reading level and hone their skills to find gainful employment.

"Our ultimate goal is to get as many people ready for that type of program as

possible," Black said. "While they might have significant deficits in reading or computational skills, other skills can be developed, and if they find the right job, they can be phenomenal."

Jenkins said she wants to build more relationships with surrounding businesses like Krogers and Walgreens to help students find jobs after college.

"There are so many businesses that need help, and we could fill that need with our students," she said.

Ruth Nuñez, an officer with the Houston Police Department, spent two years searching for a program for her 18-year-old daughter, Amy Hill, who has special needs, before finding LSC-CyFair. Hill graduated from Morton Ranch High School in Katy this past spring and expected to attend college.

"The point of going to school is to continue with what she learned in high school as far as job skills, self-sufficiency and any other reason anybody wants a college education," Nuñez said.

Susan White, director of communications and community relations for Reach Unlimited Inc., said the Learning Activity Center assigns each adult a job for which they receive a paycheck, something Black and White feel is essential.

"Our clients, they love their jobs," White said. "We want them to experience the joy of earning a paycheck."

Without that driving force to continue their education, many adults become listless, said Mary Keadle, a Copperfield resident who enrolled her son Travis, 20, in the program.

"That's why these programs are so needed in the area," Keadle said. "These kids have so much potential. These kids are very bright; they're just different."

College career

- The program started in 2006 with only four students.
 - Students can earn certifications in Customer Service and Office Skills with more programs expected in spring 2010.
 - To apply or find information, visit www.lonestar.edu/ccdel-admissions
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