

New dorm to support students on autism spectrum

Aurora University to open rare facility in North America

By David Sharos
For The Beacon-News

Aurora University is aiming to become one of the nation's leaders in providing education and support for students on the autism spectrum now that it has launched work on the Betty Parke Tucker Center for Neurodiversity, scheduled to open next fall.

The center will house AU's Pathways Program for college-capable students with autism spectrum disorder and include a newly-constructed residence hall with sensory supportive features designed specifically for college students with ASD.

The five-story residence hall will house both those on the autism spectrum and those who are not as part of the university's effort to integrate students with autism into campus life. The spaces are designed with the goal of alleviating anxiety so that students can focus their energy on a positive college experience, according to university officials.

AU will welcome its first class of college freshmen and transfer students on the autism spectrum into the Pathways Collegiate Program for the 2022-23 academic year, and applications are already underway, officials said.

The project got a boost months ago, thanks to a \$1.3 million gift from Don Tucker, a 1951 graduate of the university, in memory of his late wife Betty Parke Tucker, who graduated from the university a year later.

According to a news release from the university, Betty Parke Tucker "devoted more than 40 years to the education community as an elementary teacher, guidance counselor and school psychologist. She had a heart for students who didn't adjust easily and made it her life's work to help lift them up."



A five-story residence hall set to open next fall at Aurora University will have sensory supportive features designed specifically for college students with autism spectrum disorder. **AURORA UNIVERSITY**

Since April 2020, Brianne Jonathan, the director of the university's Autism Initiative and Pathways Program, has spearheaded research that went into planning the facility and support program.

"We spent time researching needs and talking to families and individuals on the spectrum who have been through college so we could start formatting this program with the most knowledge we could have," Jonathan said. "The first six months were really heavily based on researching programs in the country and North America and talking to families about their college experience and what services would be most helpful to them."

Jonathan said that the research "really helped to frame what we wanted to do here at Aurora University" and that the school's planned facility "is the first

that we know of to be built from the ground up."

"There is one other school that we know of that is renovating a current building for this purpose, but we have not been able to locate any residence halls or dorm rooms on a college campus in North America that have been built with intentionality and sensory supportive needs," she said. "As far as programs — we maintain that we have one of the most robust programs in the whole nation."

Aurora University President Rebecca Sherrick said the right combination of services can help students that fall within the autism spectrum to be successful.

"At Aurora University we have a tradition of opening our doors to populations of students that are too frequently underrepresented on campuses," said Sherrick. "Many young people diagnosed with

autism spectrum disorder have the academic ability to earn a college degree, if provided with the right blend of services. But relatively few colleges and universities recognize this potential."

Cases of autism are on the rise, officials have said. According to the news release from the university, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that "the rate of (autism spectrum disorder) diagnosis in the U.S. is one in 54 children, more than double the rate of one in 110 a decade earlier — making ASD the fastest-growing developmental disability in the U.S."

Jonathan said the university already has autism support programs running for high school and transfer students to transition to college and that the university is "on target to number 10 to 20 in our first group

for the (new) collegiate program."

"That may sound like a small number, but it's actually pretty large — most universities start with anywhere from four to six — maybe 10 in their first class," she said. "We've had exceptional interest in the programming. The preparatory programs we are offering have really increased our interest."

Naperville resident Julie Kornak's son Ryan Kornak, 16, a student at Waubonsie Valley High School in Aurora, enrolled in the AU Pathways program last summer and has his sights set on attending the university where his mother is anticipating a seamless transition.

"We were introduced to the Pathways program, which was a summer program, and my son also goes to the university during the school year as part of

a social program to stay connected," she said. "As they kick off this new collegiate program next year, my son is going to be much more prepared to be on a college campus and receive support."

Jonathan said the program will help round out and expand the profile of the university as the school "has always had a mission of including populations that aren't always reached in the college setting."

"We have a great history of that, and when we talk about neurodiversity — we're all that way and we're just expanding the range of individuals who are served by our university," she said. "We're not out to fix these students or have them not have autism anymore — we're looking to enrich our campus' diversity by including more unique ways of learning and thinking."

Students on the autistic spectrum will be integrated in the new facility along with others, Jonathan said, who stressed that "these students that we are recruiting for the Pathways program aren't existing in a silo" and that the school "doesn't want this to be the 'autism building.'"

According to Sandra Jones, executive director for content strategy at the university, "the school will not be receiving any federal funds for the project and plans to continue fundraising as well as using some of its operating funds to pay for the balance."

The residence hall that is part of the program, Jones said, is just the beginning.

"The residence hall is only one aspect of the Pathways program for college students with autism," Jones said. "The program, which has been years in the making, involves an entire web of services designed specifically for individuals with autism so that they can earn their degrees and launch their careers."

David Sharos is a freelance reporter for The Beacon-News.