



## Center for Autism Studies Receives Funding For TOPS Program

YSU's Center for Autism Studies aims to increase the involvement of faculty and students engaged in autism research, improve the preparation of educators and human services professionals who work with individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and their families, and provide professional development to improve services and outcomes for individuals with autism across their lifespan. One of the Center's initiatives, the Transition Options in Postsecondary Settings Program (YSU-TOPS) engages YSU students, staff and faculty in supporting young adults with autism spectrum disorders or intellectual disabilities (ID) in an integrated college experience. The program focuses on increasing students' self-determination and employment skills through participation in: a) inclusive college classes and program specific courses; b) social and recreational experiences; and c) internships within the university and community businesses.

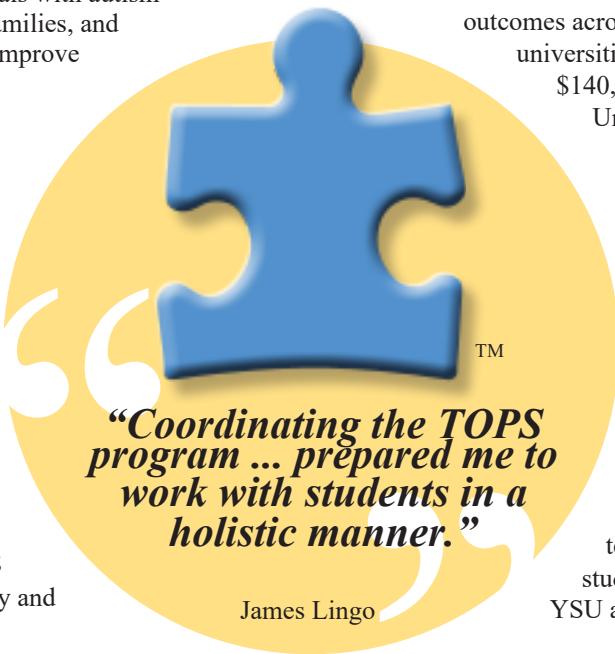
The Center for Autism Studies has been successful in securing external funding to support the program since its inception in 2013. Initial funding was received through Ohio State University's (OSU) Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities Grant from the US Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education to cover program development efforts at YSU. In January 2015, the YSU Center for Autism Studies was one of 12 postsecondary institutions awarded the Autism Speaks® Brian and Patricia Kelly Postsecondary Scholarship Fund in the amount of \$25,000 to provide educational opportunities after high school for young adults with ASD. The funds support students' participation in the TOPS program during the current academic year.

During the summer of 2015, Dr. Darlene Unger, the Director of the Center for Autism Studies, collaborated with colleagues

from four Ohio institutions (OSU, University of Cincinnati, University of Toledo and Marietta College) in submitting a grant to the US Department of Education Office of Postsecondary

Education to enhance and evaluate programs and participant outcomes across programs at the respective universities. YSU will receive approximately \$140,000 across the five years of the grant. Unger believes YSU's collaboration with colleagues across four institutions of higher education provides strong evidence of having developed a network to drive systematic change in education and employment services for individuals with ASD and ID in Ohio as well as position the Center for Autism Studies to secure additional funding to support research and other goals of the Center.

The TOPS program provides additional support and career-focused teaching and learning experiences for students with ASD or ID who enroll at YSU and access typical university services,



as well as individuals who do not wish to pursue a degree yet desire opportunities to continue their education and career preparation beyond high school with similar-age peers. The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 expanded opportunities for students with autism or intellectual disabilities with programs similar to TOPS operating at over 245 colleges and universities across the country. The regulations for these programs mandate 50 percent or more of students' time in the program represent participation in inclusive or integrated environments where the number of individuals without disabilities exceeds the number of individuals with disabilities. As the program evolves, TOPS students will enroll in university classes, participate in internships across the university or community, and access the same university events and services as any other YSU student.

YSU graduate students have been actively involved in the development and implementation of the TOPS program and in writing grant proposals. James Lingo, a 2015 graduate of the Master of Science in Education in Counseling - Student Affairs Leadership and Practice program, served as the project coordinator from 2014-2015. In this role, he was given opportunities to develop and hone his skills in working with students with ASD and cognitive disabilities. Mr. Lingo, who now works as an Academic Advisor to Special Populations at Florida Gulf Coast University communicates, "Coordinating the TOPS program not only prepared me for working with students with ASD and cognitive disabilities, it prepared me to work with students in a holistic manner. Every class with the TOPS Program is unique and can vary from day to day. This constant change and adjustment helped me to think quicker and be more solution focused when working with students in the advising realm. Through working with TOPS, I gained several character attributes that translated well into my job as an academic advisor. Most importantly I learned the value of patience and critical thinking. The critical thinking component must take place in both the advisor and the student for a lesson or appointment to be successful."

First-year school psychology graduate student, Savannah O'Brien, now serves as the TOPS program coordinator, and graduate counseling student Adam Bickell serves as a TOPS instructor. Ms. O'Brien works to develop curricula and coordinate inclusive activities for TOPS students.

She coordinates the involvement of YSU undergraduate students who work with TOPS students through tutoring, instruction in self-determination skills, and also provides social or recreational experiences. Susan Maruca, a practicing attorney and part-time instructor for YSU's English Department volunteers with the TOPS program, coordinates services for degree-seeking students and provides instruction to TOPS students in writing, self-advocacy and technology integration. YSU students majoring in special education, applied behavior analysis, counseling and psychology have served as educational coaches, and receive training on working with students with ASD and ID in the areas of systematic instruction, based on the principles of applied behavior analysis, and social thinking. Although numerous support services are available to all YSU students through the Center for Student Progress, students with ASD or ID may be reluctant to seek assistance or be

less skilled in communicating their learning challenges or other support needs. Some colleges and universities have been slow to identify and respond to the needs of individuals with ASD, not necessarily because of the lack of interest, services and support available on college campuses, but because of limited knowledge of how to best meet the needs of individuals with ASD or ID. Students with ASD or ID who desire accommodations must register with student disability services and initiate requests for accommodations.

Students with ASD often experience difficulties with social cognition and communication and need further strategy instruction in skills related to perspective-taking and interpreting emotions and the intentions of others in order to advocate for accommodations, participate in class discussions and activities,



*Attorney Susan Maruca assists students.*

problem solve with peers, and interact with advisors, classmates and instructors. TOPS program staff and educational coaches provide the critical link between the student with ASD or ID and existing university services. The aim is to go beyond mere compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments in supporting TOPS students. The program also offers specialized instruction in skills such as self-awareness, self-advocacy, choice making, self-monitoring, goal setting, and communication/ perspective-taking. Individuals with ASD and ID may have underdeveloped skills in these areas, yet these skills are necessary to be successful in postsecondary education and employment. For additional information about the TOPS program, please email Darlene Unger (ddunger@ysu.edu) or Savannah O'Brien (sjobrien02@student.ysu.edu).