

College Plus: Peer to Peer, Building Confidence, Supporting Dreams

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College Plus Orientation Session Photo credit Sheri Shifman

In 2005, peer support was gaining momentum in Pennsylvania through a systems' transformation grant and via A Call For Change (OMHSAS 2005) which advocated for recovery-oriented mental health services. Bucks County, having already embraced and promoted the integration of peers in mental health services through an annual Recovery Conference, supported employment, psychiatric rehabilitation, and Peer Drop-In Centers, had a desire to see peer support build on its successes and expand. Funding training for Certified Peer Specialists

(CPS), offering supported education, and providing more opportunities to people with mental illnesses for career growth became major areas of focus.

Having already partnered with Bucks County Community College (BCCC) around a Tuition Assistance Program (TAP -- TAP into Your Future) for provider staff working with individuals with intellectual disabilities, the Bucks County Department of Mental Health/Developmental Programs (MH/DP) expanded this opportunity to individuals with mental illness in 2007. In collaboration with this effort, the Bucks County Department of Behavioral Health asked a local non-profit, Voice and Vision, Inc., to partner with BCCC in an initiative to help people with mental illness attend college.

Voice and Vision, Inc., small, innovative, and well-known within the community for their peer work, directly approached their target audience, people with mental illnesses, to design the initiative. Over a period of two months, 110 people receiving mental health services were interviewed through focus groups and surveys to determine if individuals were interested in college, identify the barriers to attendance, and identify strategies to maximize college success. The results revealed individuals did have a desire for college, but fear of failure, social anxiety, and lack of finances held them back. For some, it had never occurred to them that college was a possibility.

In its next step, Voice and Vision assembled an advisory committee, consisting of BCCC staff and individuals diagnosed with mental illnesses that had either gone to college or had a strong desire to go. This group shaped College Plus (CP), a peer- led college program focused on the needs of individuals in recovery from a mental illness. In its effective program pilot, the CP team leveraged existing relationships within the mental health provider community to advertise the launch and to network with Case Managers/CPSs at training classes and industry events. Over the years, students continued to be referred from these sources as well as the Bucks County Intermediate Unit, alternative schools, resource fairs, the Voice and Vision website, CP alumni, and family members who hear of CP through support groups and word of mouth.

To enter CP, potential students fill out an application and then participate in an interview with CP staff. If accepted into the program, students attend a CP orientation prior to the semester to prepare for their college experience and their participation in the CP program. Students are helped with placement tests, class registration, meeting other CP students, obtaining books/supplies, and offered other support as needed. Students receive funding for one class and books, phone access to a peer, twice-monthly support groups with other students, and a weekly face-to-face or phone contact with a peer throughout the semester. More recently, CP added a person-centered-

planning tool to the program, called Hope and New Directions (H.A.N.D.®), where the students receive assistance in goal setting and long term planning. The semester culminates with an end of semester celebration and help with moving into the next semester. Students may participate in the CP peer support throughout the duration of their college education.

A strong partnership is maintained with BCCC which provides space for Peer Support groups and access to The Accessibility Office. The Office provides an individualized assessment for each student to determine his/her needs for a successful learning environment.

Jennifer C. Osinski, M.Ed., M.S., Director of The Accessibility Office stated.

The Accessibility Office (TAO) at Bucks County Community College is happy to sponsor the College Plus Program on all three campuses. TAO refers students that meet criteria for the program if they have not yet connected with the program. With the increasing number of people with mental health diagnosis on the rise, there are more and more students that reflect this segment of the population in the overall college community.

Community organizations like the College Plus Program provide the support and scaffolding that these students require in order for them to build their self-determination.

College Plus is the scaffolding that promotes progress toward life-changing goals. Bucks County Community College is an open access college. With community

partnerships like College Plus, Bucks County Community College is able to ensure greater levels of access to education for students with mental health diagnosis.

In addition to the TAO, CP also cultivated relationships with various BCCC departments to ensure a seamless experience for the students in regards to books and payments. Since CP provides funding for one college course, the CP team provides information on additional sources of funding for subsequent semesters and/or additional classes. TAP, Office of Vocation Rehabilitation (OVR), and Financial Aid are a few of the opportunities for students. TAP and CP are currently funded by Bucks County MH/DP.

CP continues to demonstrate improved outcomes through experience, end-of-semester surveys, and student reporting. Since its inception, CP has assisted 159 students. In addition to providing educational opportunities, the program has also positively reshaped the lives of many students. Some examples: John's future didn't look promising as he failed-out in his first attempt at college. Now, he has a degree in Business Administration from Penn State and is applying to law school. He attributes CP to giving him the push he needed to pursue his goals. Mary, diagnosed with a mental illness as a child and in a Learning Support Class from 4th grade through high school, started her college experience through CP in 2008 and throughout the years still uses the CP peer support. Mary has made the Dean's List and has only two

courses left to graduate. Mark had many college starts and stops for three years until connecting with CP. He graduated with an Associates' degree in Psychology in December 2016. It wasn't Jeff's Asperger's diagnosis that was keeping him from success at BCCC; it was his anxiety. He began CP with one course the first semester and continues by taking two classes each semester. Jeff is making good grades and set to graduate in 2018 with an Associates' in English. Jerry, as a younger man, desired to be an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) and volunteered for a local ambulance. Then he was diagnosed with a mental illness -- derailing his dreams. Now, in his early 50's and with the help of CP, Jerry received a Certificate in Public Safety with a focus on emergency vehicle driver training. He plans to volunteer with a local company until he is ready for paid work. Frank was three credits from graduating with a bachelor's degree and had given up, due to unfocused and delusional thinking. The university he attended allowed Frank to finish his three credits at BCCC through support of the CP program. With the ongoing encouragement to focus and complete his work and connection to other students who cheered him on at support groups, Frank graduated in 2015. Hannah, having various diagnoses including PTSD, was institutionalized off and on since age 11. Through the help of CP and TAP, Hannah graduated in 2014 with a certificate in web design.

A true measure of achievement is in the expression of

gratitude from the CP students. The best feedback is received through student quotes:

"College Plus gave me self-confidence, the feeling I could do something significant and complete it."

"College Plus treated me like a human being; to feel human was precious to me."

Over the last ten years, College Plus has come to represent hope, encouragement, and the possibility for a brighter future. The peer support remains the critical component showing individuals in recovery their peers believe in them, will stand with them, and seeing others in recovery receive their degree, gives them confidence that they can do it too.

Works Cited

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Author Bios:

Mindy Haas started with Voice and Vision, Inc. in August 2016 as a Hope and New Directions (H.A.N.D.®)

Coordinator working with the College Plus students. In

September 2016, she accepted a position as the College Plus Coordinator assisting with the daily College Plus activities and is responsible for the operational improvement and strategic growth of the program. Also, Mindy is one of the regular authors for the Voice and Vision Blog. Mindy previously worked in account management within the healthcare industry and holds a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration in Marketing.

Anthony Pacifico is the Coordinator of Rehabilitation Services at Bucks County Mental Health/Developmental Programs. Within his role, he oversees Peer Support, Support Employment, Supported Education and Psychiatric Rehab programs.

Valerie Melroy is co-founder and Chief Executive Officer of Voice and Vision, Inc. Valerie has a 42-year history of serving youth, adults, and families affected by mental illnesses, addictions, and/or disabilities. Her passion is developing and supporting individuals, teams, and services that cultivate creativity, resiliency, and hope.