

# McDaniel Step Ahead: A Summer Transitional Program for First Year College Students with Disabilities

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## Abstract

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of students with disabilities seeking postsecondary education. The complexity of needs is also increasing, resulting in more students withdrawing from college or taking leaves of absence in their first year. In 2012, the Student Academic Support Services office (SASS) at McDaniel College piloted *McDaniel Step Ahead*, a five-day transition program that aims to fine-tune the academic, social, and independent living skills of first year students with disabilities. As a result, there has been a notable increase in the number of students with disabilities still in active status at the end of their first year. The early connection with SASS and McDaniel resources creates a natural venue for early detection and intervention. This practice brief describes the implementation of *Step Ahead*, the needs addressed by *Step Ahead*, the data collected from past years, and the implications and challenges for planning future years.

Keywords: *Disabilities, college, transition*

The *Step Ahead* summer experience at McDaniel College anticipates challenges that first-year students with disabilities may encounter and provides strategies for students to become strong self-advocates. Specifically, *Step Ahead* participants sharpen their skills in note-taking, reading comprehension, time management, study strategies, assistive technology, communicating with professors and roommates, college-level writing, and independent living skills such as maintaining hygiene and interacting with peers.

Though summer bridge programs are offered nationwide, *Step Ahead* is distinctive in its broad applicability (in contrast to programs that focus on a specific diagnosis, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder), and its low cost. *Step Ahead* is intended for all students, not just students diagnosed with learning disabilities, registered with the disability support office, known as the Student Academic Support Services (SASS) office, *Step Ahead* is offered at the low cost of \$250. Other residential programs of

a similar length (one to three weeks) may cost between \$2,600 to \$5,800.

The need for Disability Services (DS) offices to help facilitate a successful transition to college is arguably greater than ever. Enrollment of students with disabilities has more than tripled in the past twenty years (Hong, 2015), yet most professors report not feeling properly prepared or equipped to instruct students with disabilities (Orr & Goodman, 2010), making the need for self-advocacy all the more important. Additionally, students with disabilities are frequently not prepared to thrive in a postsecondary setting due to lack of transition planning; planning that starts too late or provides too little information; or lack of knowledge about postsecondary accommodations, services, and expectations. Dual enrollment is one strategy found to be effective in preparing students for college, but not all students have access to this type of program (Brand, Valent, & Danielson, 2013).

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### Depiction of the Problem

Between fall 2010 and fall 2015, the number of students registered with McDaniel College's SASS increased by 32%. In addition, the percentage of the college student population registered with the SASS office increased from 9% of the total population in 2010 to 14% of the population in 2015. Not only has the number of students with disabilities increased, but the level of need of these students has also increased.

Over the past five years, there has been an increase in the number of students in all disability categories at McDaniel College. The level of academic, psychological, social, and emotional need is higher. There are also more students on the Autism Spectrum, many students with more than one diagnosis, and a large spectrum of IQs ranging from borderline to superior. Numerous students have received high levels of support in high school and often anticipate receiving identical support in college. Some students attended alternative high schools where they may not have had regular homework assignments and were not assessed through papers and tests. Several students had one-on-one support in the classroom. As a result, many incoming students arrive unprepared for college-level work. Additionally, many students who receive mental health treatment at home do not continue with services when they arrive at college. Consequently, there is an increase in students going to the hospital for psychological reasons. Because McDaniel is a residential campus, not all students have a vehicle, which makes it difficult for students to connect with resources in the community since Westminster, Maryland does not have a large public transportation system. In the end, more students are withdrawing from college or taking leaves of absence within or at the close of their first year. To address these issues, McDaniel College piloted *McDaniel Step Ahead* in 2012. Without *Step Ahead*, students with disabilities were at risk of higher attrition rates due to academic deficiency, unmet mental health needs, and prolonged difficulty acclimating to the campus environment.

### Participant Demographics and Institutional Partners/Resources

McDaniel College is a small (approximately 1,600 undergraduate students), selective, private, coeducational liberal arts college in Westminster, Maryland whose students come from 37 states and 30 countries. Fifty-three percent of the undergraduate students identify as female; 76% are White. Forty-one percent of the entering freshman class of 2015 are first-generation college students. Mirroring the general population, *Mc-*

*Daniel Step Ahead* participants represent a wide array of demographic categories. The number of students enrolled in *Step Ahead* increased from 24 students in 2012 to 32 students in 2015. Disability diagnoses include ADHD, learning disabilities, psychological disorders, physical impairments, and Autism Spectrum Disorders. Although the participants were predominantly White in 2012 (84%), the racial and ethnic diversity has increased by 12% by 2015. Participant ages range from 17-25, with up to 13% being transfer students.

To meet participants' complex array of needs during *Step Ahead*, a host of campus departments collaborate to support a well-rounded, comprehensive program. The Office of Institutional Advancement works to secure continuing funding to offset the base cost of *Step Ahead*. Student Affairs provides informational sessions to introduce students to all aspects of student life, and academic departments present mock lectures. Deans host social events to offer a welcoming, personal atmosphere. The collaboration and support across campus offices and departments is crucial to the success of *McDaniel Step Ahead*.

### Description of Practice

*McDaniel Step Ahead* provides tools for navigating college life, including how to self-advocate, and how to properly utilize supports within our disability services office. The five-day program features team-building activities, academic workshops, field trips, and tips about college life. Participants meet the SASS staff and take the initial steps in creating a sound college routine that incorporates college resources, supportive faculty and staff, and peer interaction.

Students of diverse backgrounds may participate, as enrollment is open on a rolling basis to all registered incoming students. By making *Step Ahead* attractive to incoming students and their families/ guardians, the program has hosted a cohort of 25-35 students each year since its inception.

Essential learning strategies are taught and reinforced throughout the five-day program via audio, visual, and kinesthetic workshop activities. Through modeling appropriate classroom behaviors, email etiquette, and self-advocacy while discussing accommodations, *Step Ahead* participants build confidence and – in the case of students who have never had to self-advocate – acquire the language necessary to discuss their unique learning differences, likely challenges, and accommodations with their professors. *Step Ahead* also allocates time to elucidating the differences between high school and college. Participants have the opportunity to practice assistive technology in hands-on workshops, which builds

confidence and camaraderie by allowing some students who are already familiar with assistive technologies the opportunity to shine as experts while giving novice users the freedom to learn in a low-stakes environment.

*McDaniel Step Ahead* spans several hours over the course of each day and strikes a balance between academic workshops and social activities. Contact between the SASS office and participants begins in the weeks leading up to *Step Ahead*; students are contacted by both peer mentors and SASS office staff. Once students arrive on campus, it is a fully immersive experience; students can feel connected to campus and the surrounding community. Each participant is assigned a *Step Ahead* peer mentor, who is vetted and trained by SASS staff. The mentors are also students registered with SASS and are able to provide a peer perspective on being a college student with a disability, with the aim of reducing stigma surrounding the use of academic supports, as well as providing an initial social connection for incoming students. *Step Ahead* mentors continue to plan social events and provide outreach throughout the first semester. Peer mentors have proven invaluable to *Step Ahead* as a resource for students who are new to self-advocacy or who face social challenges.

By establishing early connections with SASS staff, students enrolled in *Step Ahead* (and their families/guardians) benefit from early intervention strategies. *Step Ahead* students meet and become familiar with resources for self-care, such as Campus Safety and the Wellness Center. Families/guardians are invited to a parent information session that provides information about the differences between accommodations in high school and college, outlines the students' right to privacy as it relates to FERPA, and provides guidance to help them transition into the role of parents of college students.

Feeling unable to predict what college will be like is a common anxiety for first-year students, so living on campus for five days before first-year orientation is comforting to many participants. Students have the opportunity to attend condensed class lectures from McDaniel professors to get a feel for classes and note-taking. This activity fosters goodwill between the faculty and the SASS office, increasing faculty buy-in while offering students early access to different teaching and communication styles. This access can be especially beneficial for first-generation and/or low-income students who may feel more reticent than their peers due to a sense of otherness or being an outsider to the college experience. Regardless of background, the academic workshops in *Step Ahead* build self-esteem, reduce anxiety, and normalize the experience of navigating higher education with a disability.

## Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

*McDaniel Step Ahead* collects qualitative and quantitative data each year for future planning. All participants take a pre-assessment survey prior to the start of *Step Ahead* and a post-assessment survey on the final day of the program. These surveys assess how students perceive their level of preparedness academically, socially, and independently. The pre-test and post-test responses are compared for each question. In 2012, post-test averages were higher in 24 out of 25 comparisons, 21 of which were statistically significant. The greatest increases appeared in the students' familiarity with resources at McDaniel and the Westminster community. In 2013, 23 out of 24 post-test averages were higher, 18 of which were statistically significant. In 2014, the post-test averages were higher in 23 out of 24 comparisons, 19 of which were statistically significant. The data from all three years are nearly identical, demonstrating that *Step Ahead* is consistently effective. In addition to the assessment data, a brief survey is sent to the families/guardians of *Step Ahead* participants. In 2012, 2013, and 2014, 100% of families/guardians who completed the survey agreed that they would recommend *Step Ahead* to future incoming students with disabilities.

Retention data are also monitored at the end of each year. For the 2012 cohort, 67% of students were still in active standing, but only 50% were still active at the end of their second year. After much reflection, data interpretation, and improvements, *Step Ahead* 2013 yielded much stronger data with 90% of participants still on active status after their first year, and 86% active at the end of their second year. In the 2014 cohort, 83% of participants were still active at the end of their first year, and 72% by the end of their second year. Also, *Step Ahead* 2013 was the pilot year for the *Step Ahead* mentor program, which may have contributed to the higher retention rate of later years.

Program data indicates that participation in *Step Ahead* fosters connections between peers, strengthens students' self-advocacy skillset, familiarizes students with the accommodations available to them, and mitigates stressors common to the first-year experience, such as feeling intimidated by professors or anticipating that their disability will be stigmatized (Kranke, Jackson, Taylor, Anderson-Fye, & Floersch, 2013). Upon completion of the program, the majority of students reported that they felt ready for college, and that they enjoyed their time in *Step Ahead*.

## Implications and Portability

Changes are made to *Step Ahead* each year based on staff observations and evaluation data. After reviewing the retention data from the pilot year in 2012, two major changes were implemented. First, each student was matched with a *Step Ahead* peer mentor, an upperclassman who also has a documented disability. Since the implementation of the mentors in 2013, the SASS office has observed an increase in students feeling comfortable coming to the SASS office to use resources. Additionally, staff has observed improved relationships among students; they remain friends and support each other throughout their time at McDaniel College. Second, assistive technology was incorporated into the workshops, which led to a notable increase in students using assistive technology during the semester. Other campuses adopting a program such as Step Ahead should consider including peer mentors and using assistive technology for best results. Other campuses should also consider daily evaluations to gain valuable feedback from the students. Changes are made to the content of the *Step Ahead* workshops yearly based on workshop evaluations that students complete at the end of each day. These daily evaluations also provide feedback on the pacing of the schedule and help us determine the right balance of academic and social activities.

*Step Ahead* faces several ongoing challenges, which would affect its portability to other campuses. The first challenge is funding, to pay for expenses such as staff salaries, social activities, and workshop supplies. Staffing presents a second challenge. It would be difficult for a one-person DS office to offer this program because of the staff to student ratio required. *Step Ahead* has approximately ten staff members each year for a maximum of 35 students. DS offices of all sizes will need to find accessible, available spaces on campus to host activities and hold workshops. A growing student population seeking disability services is an ongoing challenge that makes it difficult to keep the program small. Not only is the population of students growing, the level of need is also increasing. The needs of each cohort are very different, which requires a level of flexibility once the program begins.

With the success of *Step Ahead*, areas of additional research have been identified to consider how to apply this program to other populations. Modifying the program for other specific at-risk populations, such as first-generation, international, or transfer students is a future possibility. Research could also be conducted on how to alter the program for students with specific types of disabilities.

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