

## [USFSP News Center »](#)

# **K-16 Initiatives Expands with Federal Grant**

Posted [April 19, 2011](#) at 9:33 am by [Robert Baynard, '12](#)

While the part mentors play in the overall K-16 Educational Initiatives may seem small amid a myriad of programs, their contributions to services for students with intellectual disabilities represent what a newly funded collaboration at USF St. Petersburg is striving for statewide.

“The stigma that surrounds students that are developmentally or intellectually disabled is really gone,” said Adam DePrimo, an anthropology major and social mentor for Project STING RAY, one of the programs at USFSP helping students with intellectual disabilities transition out of high school.

With a five-year, \$2.1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the team at the K-16 Educational Initiatives in the College of Education have set out to change the standards of transition student education. Their statewide collaborative effort, called the Florida Consortium on Postsecondary Education and Intellectual Disabilities, will build resources for existing and future programs, including Project STING RAY at USF St. Petersburg.

The consortium’s programs address the social, professional and academic needs of students with intellectual disabilities transitioning out of high school with a special diploma.

With inclusivity at the foundation of the initiatives, mentors such as DePrimo help include the program’s students in university life; they’ve gone swimming, played ping-pong in the student lounge and eaten lunch together at the Tavern. Academic mentor and psychology major Rachel Baumsteiger helps her mentee and classmate with studying and setting academic goals.

“I think there are also the benefits of knowing someone, and we’re becoming friends,” Baumsteiger said. “I think that’s definitely a benefit to both of us, and it should be a lasting friendship. It’s a win-win for me because when I go over the class materials with her, it definitely forces me to learn it better.”

Both DePrimo and Baumsteiger say they have established lasting friendships with the students they mentor.

“The key to this whole program is that the students’ classroom is the whole university campus,” said Federico Valadez, a regional transition representative for Project 10, the Florida Department of Education’s statewide discretionary project for the transition of students with disabilities that is headquartered at USF St. Petersburg.

Led by USFSP, the consortium is working with nine Florida colleges and universities to create model programs that will lead to a credential for students with intellectual disabilities and provide access to a postsecondary institution.

“What K-16 Initiatives is trying to do,” said Vivian Fueyo, dean of the College of Education, “is expand the impact of what great colleges of education have already been doing; to provide support to individuals in the community with children and young people with disabilities.”

The consortium pools resources with partnering institutions to align programs with the criteria in the national Department of Education’s initiative on Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities into Higher Education (TPSID). The consortium is also working to establish a curriculum that meets the approval of statewide employers.

“These are students that otherwise would not have access to any type of options at a postsecondary level,” said Michael Shaffer, K-16 Initiatives project coordinator. “This is giving options and access to postsecondary education that they wouldn’t otherwise have.”

Participating students receive individualized education plans that are continually adapted to suit their personal goals. Initiatives’ staff members are also working to provide students the opportunity to apply for financial aid in the future.

The K-16 Initiatives staff of 14 professionals and 12 student mentors is led by principal investigator Jordan Knab and co-principal investigator Harold “Bill” Heller. Both manage and administer the transition programs within the College of Education.

Special diploma programs in public schools allow students with intellectual disabilities to stay in high school until age 22 even if they have met the graduation requirements by age 18. The transition programs provide another option.

“A lot of times they’re sitting in classes with people who are much younger than them instead of being allowed to continue with their friends who they have been naturally included with,” Shaffer said. “Because we’re coming up now with a generation that has not had a distinct division of students with disabilities and students without disabilities, we’re creating a natural inclusivity that we never had before.”