

Speech and Hearing Sciences premieres ASD mentoring program

By Emily Sawan
Contributing writer

One out of every 68 children is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a developmental disability that can cause social and behavioral challenges and is five times more prevalent in males than females.

Winter quarter at the UW hailed the birth of a pilot program focused on mentoring people with ASD, thanks to a collaboration between the Speech and Hearing Sciences department and Disability Resources for Students (DRS).

Karen Jacobsen and Lauren Nehilla, clinical instructors for Speech and Hearing Sciences, spearhead the program. They recruited the help of Colleen Harker, a graduate student of psychology, and Jill Locke, a research professor for Speech and Hearing Sciences.

"[There is a] bulge [of

people] right now coming through college, and [there is] more and more need for support for people on the spectrum at the collegiate level," Nehilla said.

There are typically many resources available for children and adults with ASD, but very few for young adults.

During autumn quarter, the program took applications for mentors from students in Speech and Hearing Sciences. After a rigorous interviewing process, five mentors were selected and enrolled in an independent study course.

For the first month of winter quarter, they met on a weekly basis and received training to become a mentor. One of the hardest parts of the program was defining the parameters of the mentor role, and the best way the students could fulfill it for their mentees' benefit.

After the training, there was a meet-and greet for the mentors and mentees. From then on,

the pair met once a week on their own, while the mentors continued to meet together as a group on a weekly basis.

From the beginning, the focus of the one-on-one meetings was on the mentees and where they needed the most support. Topics included organizational, social, and interpersonal skills, but the overall emphasis remained on the mentees driving the direction of the program.

The program is now beginning to be reviewed for next year. Interviews for new mentors will ideally begin in the spring, so the program can start immediately in the fall.

"This [program] is a really novel idea," Locke said. "Very few universities in the states are doing this. I really like seeing that the UW is so progressive in the sense that they're open to something like this."

The eventual goal is for the program to extend downward, bridging the gap from high



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Doctoral student Colleen Harker is the affiliate instructor assisting with the peer mentor program for students with ASD.

school to college, and making that transition successful.

"[I hope] this seed we've planted will grow into something bigger," Nehilla said.

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