



Manufacturing Academy for Students With Autism



By Teri Cettina

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California's Glendale Community College has created a computer numerical control certificate program specifically for students on the autism spectrum.

This June, California's Glendale Community College (GCC) will begin offering a computer numerical control (CNC) technicians certificate program specifically for students on the autism spectrum. CNC technicians program machines to shape and cut materials for a variety of manufacturing industries.

The [Uniquely Abled Project](#), a group made up of educators as well as representatives from nonprofit and for-profit organizations and state and local social service agencies, developed this

targeted academic program more than two years ago. The idea germinated when Jan Swinton, GCC's dean of workforce development, met aerospace industry representative Ivan Rosenberg when both served on a local economic development subcommittee. Rosenberg, who is the father of two children on the autism spectrum and the founder and executive director of Uniquely Abled, discussed the idea of a special training program with Swinton.

"I was immediately interested," Swinton says. "Our college noticed that students on the autism spectrum tend to be among our very best students. They're often very detail-oriented, motivated and great with computers."

Other members of the workforce subcommittee quickly joined Swinton and Rosenberg in their efforts. "Companies in our area [a Los Angeles suburb] face a serious shortage of CNC operators," Swinton says. "We realized that students on the autism spectrum often have unique talents that could make them perfect candidates for these jobs. So we set out to help train them."

How the program works

About 20 students will start GCC's first Uniquely Abled Academy in June. The program, which will run all day for 10 weeks, includes 240 hours of classroom instruction with GCC's machine technology faculty, as well as lab time and social-skills and job-readiness training. Local nonprofit organizations that work with people on the autism spectrum — including the Exceptional Children's Foundation and Goodwill Southern California — are coaching GCC's instructors and student assistants on how to work effectively with this student cohort.

"We didn't need to hire any additional faculty for this program, since it's already an existing course in our Computer-Aided Manufacturing certificate program," Swinton says. "We are adapting this particular session of the course for this unique group of students, but the content and expectations of students remain the same."

In addition to meeting the college's standard admissions requirements, students in the Uniquely Abled Academy are required to show that they can follow directions and work independently, Swinton says. If students qualify for services through the California Department of Rehabilitation, they will be assigned in-class tutors.

Bridging the gap to employment

Once students successfully complete the academy, they'll work on interviewing and on-the-job skills with volunteers from local businesses and nonprofits. Volunteers will also work with potential employers to help place students in jobs.

Some companies may need coaching on how to integrate these graduates into their companies. "For instance, managers may need to know that someone on the autism spectrum may have repetitive habits or rarely look them in the eye," Swinton says. "However, these folks also work extremely hard and may become a company's best, most loyal employees."

Uniquely Abled will also educate companies about tax credits that may be available for hiring employees with disabilities.

“This program is a win on so many levels,” Swinton says. “The college wins by attracting new or existing students to our top-quality manufacturing program. Employers win by gaining well-trained CNC employees when they typically face a shortage of these workers. Area nonprofits are pleased to be able to connect students and potential employers. And students win by being trained in a job for which they may be ideally skilled — and one that pays quite well, often at least \$18 per hour.”

Swinton says the Uniquely Abled Project hopes to eventually obtain 501(c)(3) nonprofit status. At that point, it could expand its job-training approach to other colleges and even other states.

“I’m more than happy to share our model with community colleges that want to duplicate what we’re doing,” she says. “It’s really an exciting accomplishment. And more than that, it’s just the right thing to do.”

Swinton can be reached at jswinton@glendale.edu or 818-240-1000, ext. 5158.



[Teri Cettina](#)

is a contributor to the 21st-Century Center.



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