HAPPENINGS AT THE BURKHART CENTER FOR AUTISM EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

It has been a challenging year for everyone, but the Burkhart Center has found ways to continue to provide services and outreach to families and the community. The following is a summary of some of the center’s news and events from 2020 – and a look at how we have continued to fulfill our mission in the time of the coronavirus.

**Interim Co-Directors**

With the departure of our previous director, Janice Magness and Dr. Jennifer Hamrick have stepped in to oversee the responsibilities of the center. While Janice continues to lead the Transition Academy, she has also taken on a role overseeing the continual safety measures and changes we have had to navigate in the time of coronavirus. This has been invaluable for the safety of our team as we have transitioned back to working in the building. Dr. Hamrick now oversees the graduate programs, clinical services, and research throughout the center activities. If you have questions regarding the center, please feel free to reach out to both for answers.

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CLINIC SERVICES

In order to continue providing services to our families, we have transitioned to providing applied behavioral analysis (ABA) services via telehealth.

Prior to COVID-related shutdowns, Dr. Hamrick received two grants through the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). The first grant funded the creation of our Texas Telehealth Outreach Clinic for Autism (TTOCA), which supports parent-implemented intervention via telehealth to families across the entire state of Texas. Specifically, TTOCA teaches caregivers how to implement interventions to teach a range of skills to children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in order to address skill deficits or problem behavior. The timing of this THECB grant could not have been more opportune, with face-to-face services no longer an option for the center. Our graduate students are still able to learn critical skills as part of their work with this telehealth program, and families are still able to learn valuable skills to help their children with independence.

The second THECB grant awarded to Dr. Hamrick continues funding for professional development activities through our Teacher Training Institute. Virtual workshops have been developed and rolled out to educators across the entire state at no cost to schools or teachers. So far, 77 educators have participated in trainings that began in August, directly impacting 394 children with ASD across Texas.
TRANSITION ACADEMY

The Transition Academy has been working remotely on Zoom since April 6. Currently, we have 16 students attending classes from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. The students are divided into groups of four and receive instruction in social skills, vocational skills, and practical application that includes nutrition, fitness, art, and music therapy. Students are required to report individualized study in the afternoon to their teachers. Each Friday, students receive music therapy led by Amy Andrus, a certified music therapist. Also on Friday, students participate in community outreach on Zoom. Leaders from the community discuss money management, weather, sports, personal travel, and many other topics of interest with our students. The goal of the Transition Academy, working closely with the Texas Workforce Commission, continues to emphasize independence, self-confidence and job skills necessary for transitioning into gainful employment for our students.

CASE

The Connections for Academic Success and Employment (CASE) program has expanded and is currently serving nearly 50 students. We have modified services to meet students in the virtual setting. Students are meeting with Learning Specialists each week and attending virtual social events and virtual workshops. We have successfully transitioned to new leadership, with Taylor Fidler stepping in as Program Director. Our transition to an online environment has also been a success. We have even presented at virtual conferences, speaking to the effectiveness of our online mode of delivery. CASE expects to welcome several more students to the program next year as it continues to grow and serve college-ready students.
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Summer Conference

On June 9-10, the Burkhart Center co-sponsored the 2020 Region 17 Special Education Conference, “Elevate the Vision.” This virtual conference featured local as well as nationally recognized speakers presenting on autism and a variety of other topics within special education.

Drive-In Event

On Sept. 25, the Burkhart Center hosted a Family Fun Night at the Stars & Stripes Drive-In Theatre. Over 40 families attended a screening of the movie Shrek while sitting under the stars and enjoying the beautiful evening. This was our first event since March, and it was very much enjoyed by all who attended.

Halloween Event

The Burkhart Center celebrated Halloween a little early with a drive-thru trick or treat Oct. 22 in our parking lot. Vehicle trunks were decorated in fun themes as faculty, staff, and student volunteers dressed in costume and shared treats with our families. Raider Red was in attendance and we offered an in-vehicle photo opportunity. Approximately 75 kids in 45 vehicles participated in this event.
**Parent Training**

The Burkhart Center partnered with Region 17 Education Service Center to host a free parent workshop, “Understanding Stress and Anxiety: A Parent’s Guide for Family Help and Self-Help” on Nov. 10. The workshop was repeated on Dec. 1. This virtual training was presented by Layne Pethick, an autism specialist from Region 10 ESC, who provided practical strategies to help families deal with stress and anxiety in the home.

**New Development Officer**

The Burkhart Center welcomes a new Development Officer in assisting us with the continued growth of our programs. Mallory Billings has been at Texas Tech since March 2019, previously serving as Assistant Director of Development for University Scholarships before stepping into her current role as the Assistant Director of Development for the Texas Tech College of Education and the Burkhart Center. Mallory comes from a background in adoption, having worked in Community Outreach and Donor Relations at the Gladney Center for Adoption in Fort Worth. She is thrilled to take on the privilege of raising support for Burkhart Center’s unique and vital mission.

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**Thank You**

Thank you for your continued support of our work and commitment to families and our community. We look forward to seeing you all in person, as soon as it is safe!

– Jennifer, Janice, and the entire Burkhart Team