

# ACR 217 FINAL

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autism, students, people, college, program, important, group, years, challenge, graduate assistants, deadlines, high school, work, talk, relationships, community, university, anticipate, thinking, teaching

## SPEAKERS

Chris, Marc

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**C** Chris 00:00

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development. I'm your host Dr. Christine Reeve. For more than 20 years, I've worn lots of hats in special education. But my real love is helping special educators like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research based practices in a practical way in your classroom, to make your job easier and more effective.

**C** Chris 00:33

I'm so glad that you guys are here and I am so glad that you get to meet today's guest. Dr. Marc Ellison is the executive director of the West Virginia Autism Training Center. And that is located at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia. And I am really excited for this conversation about challenges for students with ASD in college. So, Marc, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do?

**M** Marc 00:57

Sure, sure. And thank you for inviting me I'm really excited to talk to you. As you said, I'm at Marshall University. I've been here for 16 or 17 years, the Autism Training Center has been around much longer since the 80s, early 80s. It was founded by Dr. Ruth Sullivan who was a real pioneer in the field of autism. And it has three distinct departments right now. One is a statewide presence in family homes and schools helping teach multi tiered systems of positive peer support.

**M** Marc 01:31

We have a behavioral Mental Health Technical Assistance Center that's funded through grants from the Department of Education, we're really excited about that. We've had that program for

about 10 years. We've developed about 12 model schools around the state now that are delivering positive behavior support with fidelity. And then we have a college Support Program, which started at this university in 2002. Was the first such program in the country. And that's why I came to Marshall to direct that before I became the Executive Director.

**C** Chris 02:02

Awesome. Tell us a little bit just about how you got started?

**M** Marc 02:06

Oh, well, I was a student at Marshall University. And Ruth Sullivan came to a class and did a presentation on autism. And she was just starting to develop community based services in West Virginia at the time, think we have 13 state institutions, psychiatric institutions where two to 3000 individuals lived. And many of those folks were diagnosed with autism.

**M** Marc 02:31

So Ruth was trying to start a new behavior Health Center. And I thought it was an incredibly interesting presentation. I'd never heard of the word autism before. So I was excited about that. And she hired me after about a 15 minute interview, which, if you know her was surprising. And I started immediately working with her son Joseph, who was one of the three people used as a composite for the character in Rain Man film. So I worked for Ruth for almost 18 years. And as the agency grew, I think I said I was in the first 10 people hired and by the time I left 18 years later, we had 400 employees and about 500 clients. So it was a really interesting 18 years.

**C** Chris 03:16

Yeah, yeah. And I just think that connection is just really nice that, you know, Ruth's connection with the training center, as well as just she was such a pioneer in the field. I think her book might have been one of the first books when I was young, I read all of the books about kids with special needs. And her book was probably one of the first ones that I ever read.

**M** Marc 03:38

Yeah, she would write in such a relatable style. I think she was a good technical writer. But she could make it very personal and very relatable. She passed away just maybe two or three years ago, in her 90s. And I inherited a number of her books, I have them in my bookshelf here. And it's really interesting, her son Joseph works for us four days a week doing data entry. And he comes in at least twice a week and looks through those books that were in his house for a number of years, and we talk about them. It's really awesome. That's a nice bit of memorabilia.

**C** Chris 04:15

That is very awesome. So let's talk a little bit about planning for college. I think one of the things that my audience, which is parents and special educators really struggle with as students get older is thinking about that transition. And we certainly have a lot of students who are more recognized with autism now who are able to academically go on to secondary education. So how early should we begin planning for that transition?

M

Marc 04:46

Way earlier than most people think? You know, here at Marshall, we've had families with children as young as 12 visiting us talking about the future. I think that a lot of times in schools, especially I think transition planning starts at 14 or 16. And I think earlier than that's a really good idea. Really starting to try to figure out, you know, the students likes and dislikes, their strengths and challenges, but also getting them involved in the planning itself.

M

Marc 05:17

I was a first generation college students. No one even mentioned college to me until my girlfriend was going to college out of high school and I realized that I could, if I tagged along and went to college, I could hang out with her, and a few hundred miles away from my house. And that's why I went to college. And I was so unprepared for college that getting my bachelor's degree was was a real challenge. And, you know, I remember if somebody had really talked to me about systems and processes, and made me familiar with those things earlier, I would have been much further along. So I think as early as possible.

C

Chris 06:00

And I think that's a good point, I think we tend to think, Oh, now we're in high school. So now we need to start thinking and I'm always a big one for what I call teaching to the next environment. Actually, Sue may have called it teaching to the next environment. And that idea that we always have to be thinking in preschool, let's think about where we're going. I don't know where he's going to be when he's college age. But I do know that next we're going to be thinking about elementary school. So let's start thinking about that early, and really doing our instruction based on that.

M

Marc 06:30

Yes, that's right. We though we formally we have a high school program here at the university, that we target rising juniors, so after your sophomore year, if you're going into your junior year of high school, you can come and participate in our college program. It's usually about five weeks. And what we suggest to people is that they take one class that they can hit a home run in without really trying that hard.

M

Marc 06:55

And then what we're really doing is helping them learn systems and processes. You know, how to use the cafeteria and the dorm system, you know, how to decide whether you want a

to use the caretend and the dorm system, you know, how to decide whether you want a roommate or no roommate in the dorms, those kinds of things, because I think those are often more challenging questions than, you know, how will you do in math class? So those are more of a challenge, I think.

**C** Chris 07:17

Yeah, I think you're exactly right. I have an older sister with autism. And this was many, many years ago when no one knew she had autism, but my mom sent her to college away from us, which still bewilders us to some degree, but she eventually had to come home. And what faculty said was, it's not the work, she could do that work. But she can't handle the environment. And that's what really got her in trouble. And that was her struggle. And so that's why I think programs like yours are really so so important for our students. Along the same lines, what challenges do students with ASD face in the college setting that you need to think about?

**M** Marc 07:56

Well start with I think, along the vein that you just described as kind of being overwhelmed by the atmosphere. It can be so overstimulating sometimes that's a real challenge. And I think that social things are probably often more challenging than some of the academic things. I know, individuals we've supported over the last 22 years tell me that that's true. You know, getting into fraternities or sororities or, or just making friends or even learning how to socialize in a classroom is much harder for most than how to get through a math or English class.

**M** Marc 08:35

The other thing that I think is really a challenge is feeling a sense of community. You know, I think for all college students, it's important to feel connected to the university and the people in the university. I mean, I think that's why a lot of us like, or love the universities we went to, because we had some connections, some emotional kind of connection to the university. And so we had a community. And I think being a part of community or building a community probably is a real challenge for most people diagnosed with autism. So we work really hard to help people connect, and be a part of a community on campus. And I think that's been a really significant help for them to overcome that challenge.

**M** Marc 09:18

I think mental health needs are really important. Because, you know, if you're overstimulated, if you're distressed, if you have trouble with dysregulation, you're not going to probably do well in many of those activities. So we have a mental health counselor that works in our program that has specialized experience for students diagnosed with autism. So we think that's a really important thing too.

**M** Marc 09:44

I think social and independent living kind of needs are primarily the most concerning. I think, in the classroom, outside of social things, you know, staying organized is a real challenge often. So many people I know diagnosed with autism are very much in the moment and have great intentions about turning in that paper tomorrow but tomorrow comes and they forget to do it.

M

Marc 10:05

You know, I think you hear about that from teachers all the time in junior high or middle school and high school where kid will have had the homework right in the book bag, and the teacher calls for the homework and they don't take it out of the book bag for whatever reason. And that happens at college too.

M

Marc 10:19

Finally, I think one of the biggest challenges, and I think public school teachers can really help with this, is teaching self advocacy skills. And I think there's a lot of reasons that students with autism are challenged in that. But I think a real important part of any kind of support program, or educational program is teaching those skills. They're unbelievably necessary in college.

C

Chris 10:45

Yeah, when I talk about it with teachers, in my Special Educator Academy, we talk about the fact that, you know, when you're in high school, people are going to give you accommodations that are in your IEP, but when you go to college, there is no IEP. There is no one there who's going to say well on your IEP, it says that we have to do these accommodations, it's up to the student to go and get the accommodations that they need and ask for them. And if we haven't done that instruction, they're not going to have that skill. And they're going to flounder.

M

Marc 11:18

Yeah, when a student comes in our high school program, or in our adult college student program, we do a person centered plan in the beginning, what we recognize is, so many people are not ready to advocate for themselves. So, you know, for the first couple of semesters, we may do that with them, we may work closer with professors that even they do, but the entire time we're helping them learn those kinds of skills so that they can gradually take over.

C

Chris 11:45

Yeah. And, you know, I think that that's something I tried to really foster very, very early, just in the fact that, you know, you need an elementary school student to be able to not necessarily ask for their own accommodations, but to be able to tell somebody what they need, just in general, because people aren't going to know or to ask for help. And I see that as the beginning of self advocacy. It's just being able to recognize, I'm struggling, I need assistance. And that's a skill that so many of our students don't have.

M

Marc 12:15

You know, and I think in college, too, there's such a focus on academics, that you forget about how much advocacy might be needed in other areas. I remember the first summer I was here at Marshall and running the college program, there was a heatwave that went through the area that was just a stagnant Heatwave. You guys in the south think you have stagnant air, this was really bad.

M

Marc 12:36

I asked the dorm staff to do check ins with students because one of the dorms doesn't have air conditioning above the first floor. And I just knew that there were going to be some individuals in those rooms that wouldn't think about telling somebody that they're getting overheated, or that they need some water. So we had to kind of do that in their place. And so yeah, even outside of academics and and accommodations, I think it's really important.

C

Chris 13:03

Yeah, and there are so many times on a college campus where I mean, I can think back to times where it's like, I need help, I missed the bus, I need to figure out how to get to West campus from here to be in time for class. What should I do? Yeah, I think that's so important.

M

Marc 13:17

And I would add about the academic piece, the challenges is just, you know, sticking to deadlines, you know, learning that deadlines are important. Even if they're extended, they're still going to be deadlines. Everything is deadline at a university, you know, homework and classes and those kinds of things. And I think teaching students really early on to kind of anticipate respect those deadlines will really serve them well in college.

C

Chris 13:44

Yeah, I had a very bright student who would go on to college, and he really struggled with deadlines. And part of it was that people just had never really held him to a deadline, because it was like, Well, he has autism and this is, you know, he'll get it done. And, of course, the problem was that he would get fixated on something and not be able to get through it.

C

Chris 14:03

So we wrote it into his IEP, to learn how to work towards a deadline, how to break a task down into smaller components, those executive functioning kinds of skills are so so important for our students. And we have to balance because I also hear a lot of high school teacher saying, well,

college isn't going to give him that. And I'm like, Yeah, but we're not there yet. So, you know, we have to teach it, not just expect it. And I think that's the thing that a lot of people struggle with, too.

M Marc 14:32

Yeah. And you know, college sometimes will give that. I mean, I teach courses at the University and people not diagnosed with autism ask me for extensions all the time, you know, and I can't think of the last time I said no, so you know, it happens.

C Chris 14:47

Yeah, you were a nicer faculty member than I was. But yeah, exactly. I mean, when I was teaching graduate students, it was like, Are you going to turn your paper in? It's due today? I'd really liked to have it.

C Chris 15:00

So what do you see that has helped students with ASD succeed at Marshall University?

M Marc 15:08

Well, I mentioned earlier this sense of community. And I think that's been probably the most important. In fact, someone years and years ago, 15 years ago did a doctoral dissertation on in large part of our college program. And the number one thing that the students said were was important to them was the sense of community. And I have to tell you, that was not what I thought was the right thing to do. When I came to the university, I did not want to have a segregated program. I didn't want to do in house tutoring, I didn't want to load everybody up and go to the same, you know, ballgame, or whatever. And that went fine for a semester.

M Marc 15:43

And then as we started growing, we had a skills building group that we did every week, that's really the only time students saw each other. And then the second semester, they started saying to me, I really liked hanging out with that guy. Because in my high school, I didn't know anyone that saw the world like I see it. So I really liked hanging out with him. And just gradually, we started realizing that we had to build a community for folks, not just at the university, but even with people who see the world as they do. I think that's really super important.

M Marc 16:14

I also think in college, building relationships with the people that you need in your life is really important. Learning to build relationships with professors, learning to build relationships with

dorm staff, you know, in addition to self advocacy, those relationships are really vital and key. If you never talk to the professor, I don't think that one time you ask for something, it's probably going to be well received, you know, get to know the professor and interact with them.

**M** Marc 16:42

I think a big part of why the program here has been successful is that we have in addition to professional autism specialists, we use graduate assistants as mentors. And the structure of our program is that you have a director and a coordinator. And then you have autism specialists who design support programs. And then you have graduate students, and we have about 20 to 23 every semester.

**M** Marc 17:12

And their role is to develop relationships that ultimately are therapeutic and in some way, they help people stay organized to integrate into society, social kinds of things that the university that's really been the backbone of any success here is that program, we are really lucky to be able to have that they get a really good tuition waiver, and a stipend. But they work way harder than they're getting paid for. So we're really lucky to, to draw the graduate assistants we get we honestly, it's the hardest graduate assistantship on campus, it really is. And we always are turning people away, people want to do it. So it's cool.

**C** Chris 17:53

I remember you telling us that when I came to visit years and years ago, and I think that was one of the things that really stuck with me was how the students really want to do it. And I think that is really powerful.

**C** Chris 18:06

And that's a powerful statement about the community that's been built within the program and the university in general. You know, I see that in high schools where you can recruit the quarterback of the football team, and the head of the cheerleaders and the, you know, the quote unquote, popular kids in school, as your peer mentors. And those are the schools in which that inclusive nature and that acceptance has really been fostered all the way through the school system. And I think that's huge. And those peer mentors are such a great asset in your program.

**M** Marc 18:40

Absolutely. Thank you.

**C** Chris 18:42

Talk a little bit about, if you would, about how you create community, like what does that look



Talk a little bit about, if you would, about how you create community, like what does that look like?

M

Marc 18:48

Well, if I can kind of talk about the two different types of the community, the autism community on campus, and then kind of the integrated community. One of the things that we've done to help people create a community of like minded or like perception people, that may be a term I just made up, but is trying to try to have a lot of social groups and social and skill building groups. And skill building group sounds really boring, but we try to make them fun.

M

Marc 19:16

For instance, this semester, students wanted to have as one of their groups, true crime, true crime group where they talked about true crime, things that were going on. And that was awesome. You know, we can build a lot of therapeutic kinds of social skill building stuff through that, and it kept them coming. So we have a lot of groups. We have a lounge that they hang out in and play video games. And we don't schedule people in and out, they just come in and kind of graze their way in or graze their way out. But it is always open.

M

Marc 19:49

One of the things that people will tell me early on is that you know, the time between classes is a real challenge. You know, everybody knows you got to go to class from 9:00 to 9:50. Monday, Wednesday, Friday. But if you don't have another class until noon, that two hours in between is a real challenge. So we open up the whole thing and allow people to come in. But getting them together.

M

Marc 20:09

We typically every semester, have a women's group, because females may have some significant differences that require some special attention. And we have, we have something called a Discovery Group, which is really about living on campus and how to support those kinds of things. We have groups like the true crime group.

M

Marc 20:27

And this semester, we developed something called the TRY IT group. And this is the group tries something, they all decide and then vote every week to do something different that they would never do otherwise. So they end up going places and doing events that they voted on to do that, otherwise, they'd never would have done. And it's really an interesting thing. The students develop that themselves.

C

Chris 20:49



That is cool.



Marc 20:50

It was neat, the Try It group.



Marc 20:53

It's really important for us, though, to keep this integration aspect. So we use graduate assistants to help get integrated into social clubs and social organizations, fraternities and sororities.



Marc 21:06

My favorite story about that happened a long time ago, years ago, there was a group that did, that watched old movies and mocked them. That's that was the group. Science 3000, kind of, there was a show that used to do this, or I can remember the name of the show on the Sci Fi network.



Marc 21:22

So one of the students and the GA assigned him would go every night that this was held, they would watch the old sci fi movie, they would mock it, eat popcorn, laugh about it with the group, and go on. And after about four of those events, the leader of the group met the GA outside and said, you know, we really like him coming, but you're kind of a stick in the mud. So you know, we can handle things from here, you can go on.



Marc 21:50

And we thought that was awesome. You know, that was really cool. The student with autism was easily accepted that the student without autism was not.



Chris 21:58

Was getting kicked out.



Marc 21:59

Yeah, but you know, by default, I think most students with autism are not going to get involved in social activities. Most are not going to do that without some kind of plan and support at least early. And we're always looking out for ways to do that.

**C** Chris 22:17

Well, I think that's such a good point. Because I think, you know, one of the things I've seen is, I have a lot of kids and a sister who would say, you know, you would say do you want to go do this? No, no. If you ask, they're not going to. If you program it into their day, and it's part of what they're kind of daily fabric looks like, with other people that they're hanging out with, then it becomes a little bit more acceptable. And the nice thing about having such a good group is that they don't always have to do it alone, either.

**C** Chris 22:49

I love to try that group because for exactly that reason. I think there's so many things I do in my life, I'm fairly introverted, so I don't like to go do things with people I don't know. But I'm more likely to go if somebody I know is going with me. And you know, I'm going to be more comfortable at that point. And I think that's certainly true for the students as well.

**C** Chris 23:10

And I think that with the try it group, it's really cool. Because that not only builds resilience for them, you know, that's how you grow. By doing things you haven't done before, by experiencing different things. And that then gives you confidence to do more of those things. So that's so cool. That's so cool.

**C** Chris 23:31

Any other things that you think teachers should know, that we haven't talked about? We talked about self advocacy, starting early, building community, certainly the social skills and the executive functioning skills are really important for our guys coming in. Because of course, the more that they're prepared before they come to you, the more you can focus on the other things and the actual college experience instead of building the back things. But are there other skills that you think are important?

**M** Marc 23:59

Well, the first thing I thought of when you ask that is, and I think it's common sense, and your listeners are gonna know that it's common sense. But I asked staff here at the training center, to always be anticipating what the needs are. I trust students and trust people, but I want things verified. Because lots of students here, do things in a rote way or through a script that they've developed or we've helped them develop. And I think sometimes that may look, I don't mean this in a disparaging way, but sometimes that may look more independent than it really is.

**M** Marc 24:36

And I think that anticipating that and sometimes even a healthy suspicion of that, I think is

really helpful. Because we all know that when you don't anticipate and you don't give the extra details, and you don't kind of be suspicious that things are going to fall through the cracks, they do fall through the cracks. So I just think that you can't give too much the detail.

M

Marc 25:00

Now, I think, you know, any good teacher, I think does that until a foundation is laid and then starts moving away from that. But I still think that it's really important. Just anticipate what things will fall through the cracks. That's the only advice I can give. Because in college, everything's going to fall through the cracks if we don't anticipate it.

C

Chris 25:20

And I would say that's true just with adulthood is too. I mean, I see a lot of situations, especially where students are in a small community where people know them, and behavior that is accepted in that situation, because they know the students, they know that he doesn't mean anything by something he says or something he does, they don't realize that's not gonna fly in a different environment.

C

Chris 25:46

So I think that's a really good point, I think it's very easy to become accustomed to well, that's just this kid. That's just what he does. You know, we all love him. So it's not a problem. And it's like, yeah, when he when he goes up to talk to his friend, that's a girl. And instead of ringing the doorbell goes and looks at her bedroom window. That's okay, when the father knows him, but it's not going to be okay with a girl he met somewhere else.

M

Marc 26:09

Not at all.

C

Chris 26:10

I had Brenda Myles on a few episodes ago, talking about the hidden curriculum with those kinds of things. And I think that's another really good example of always thinking, Where could this fall apart? Where is the student going to encounter trouble and thinking ahead?

M

Marc 26:27

Yeah, and having hard conversations sometimes about I remember, a few years ago, there was a student who, if he talked to a girl, he kind of assumed that she talked to him, he kind of assumed that their relationship was pretty strong, even if he was just meeting. And that got him in a lot of trouble.

M

Marc 26:44

You know, so I remember getting a workbook with relationship kind of outlines, you know, that that helped you understand in a visual way, the depth of relationships from acquaintance to, you know, somebody that, that you have an intimate relationship with. And he would immediately go to an intimate relationship on that map. And he would call girls by pet names and stuff that, you know, really irritates people.

M

Marc 27:07

That was a hard conversation to tell him that, from my perspective, you and this girl are simply acquaintances. You know, it really broke his heart. I had to do it in a polite, professional way. But it really broke his heart. But it was information he needed to have. And I think sometimes those conversations can be complicated. And you know, we're all humans, none of us really want to have those kinds of complicated questions so we avoid them sometimes. But that's detail that people need.

C

Chris 27:38

And yeah, it reminds me of Brene Brown statement of clear is kind and unclear is unkind.

M

Marc 27:43

That's right.

C

Chris 27:44

And, you know, I talked about that and giving feedback to staff, it's like, we tend to not want to give it and it's like, but if you don't tell them, how are they going to know what they're doing wrong? So I think that's a really good point.

C

Chris 27:53

Thank you so much. This has been really useful. And I know that teachers will find it very helpful, as well as families, thinking about their children going on to college. Where can listeners find you? I'll make sure I have all your links in our show notes. So you can definitely anyone listening can definitely check it out there. But where can they find out more?

M


Marc 28:11

Well, they can email me at [Ellison13@marshall.edu](mailto:Ellison13@marshall.edu). Marshall has two L's [marshall.edu](http://marshall.edu). And also, I think in your notes, you'll have something called the Benchmarks of Effective Supports for College Students with Autism. I would encourage people to use that as a checklist. That's


research base. It's evidence based. And it's a checklist of things that if people are going to a university, they can check to see whether those things exist, that we all know are necessary for supports. And we found that to be a pretty functional document and tool.

 Chris 28:48

That's awesome. That'll be great. Thank you so much, Mark. I really appreciate your time and sharing all of this because I think it's something we don't talk enough about in our population in education. We have a tendency to kind of go, well, they graduated from high school, they're we go, that was our job. Yeah.

 Marc 29:05

Well thank you for inviting me. It was fun. I appreciate it, Chris.

 Chris 29:12

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