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Project 10 Hosts Pilot Transition Program at USFSP

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(St. Petersburg, Fla.) April 26, 2010 – Six students with significant cognitive disabilities are experiencing life on a university campus through STING RAY, a pilot program designed to help the students gain independence, find employment and establish positive social and work relationships.

“STING RAY fills a gap for students with cognitive disabilities,” said Jordan Knab, program director. “They’re entitled to receive educational services from the state until their 22nd birthday, but they often stay in a high school setting even after earning their special diploma because there are no other options.”

Knab also directs Project 10: Transition Education Network, the statewide project housed at USFSP that addresses transition needs of students with disabilities. Lyman Dukes, associate professor in the College of Education serves as Project 10’s principal investigator. The pilot STING RAY program, which began in March, emphasizes independence and interaction with age-appropriate peers.

In contrast to strict high school schedules, STING RAY encourages the students to develop their own schedule of working, volunteering, studying and extracurricular activities. Participants will audit courses at USF St. Petersburg, participate in activities with degree-seeking students and travel independently to the jobs they will seek based on their interests.

“We’d like to establish separate curriculum frameworks for community colleges and universities and then have similar programs replicated throughout the state,” Knab said.

Ruth Dobkin, a Pinellas county special education teacher for 15 years, is with the students daily at USFSP and will help them develop the skills they need for navigating adulthood independent from their parents.

The pilot program is a result of recommendations made by the Governor’s Commission on Disabilities’ Education Subcommittee. STING RAY broadens access for the students to gain work experience, become lifelong learners and explore career options. The program name stands for Students Transitioning Into the Next Generation, Recognizing Alternatives for Youth. Program partners include the Pinellas County School District, USFSP, the Florida Department of Education and the Governor’s Commission on Disabilities.

Michael Shaffer, project coordinator, met with each of the six students during their second month in the program to learn about their interests. One student likes to work with children. Another student already has experience working in hotels. One student already has a volunteer position with an animal shelter.
“The goal is to help them develop skills, even if it’s through unpaid work, to help them find employment and stability in the future,” Shaffer said.

Students, faculty, staff and members of the community are welcome to participate in this pilot program as mentors. For more information or to learn how to get involved, please contact Michael Shaffer at (727) 873-4661 or mpshaffe@mail.usf.edu.