

## Youth with Disabilities Seek College Success - with a Little Help

*This story spotlights one of Michigan's Children's priority areas, public policy issues related to youth in transition, looking specifically the challenges faced by youth with disabilities as they advance to postsecondary programs.*

Looking back, Elizabeth "Liz" Clute, 26, an Eaton Rapids native, said there were red flags that went unnoticed starting when she was a young teen. She had earned a high school diploma, but there were poor grades and failed classes. "I was sad and depressed, and not very well focused," she said. In 2011, she entered Lansing Community College (LCC) but class struggles continued. Unmotivated and experiencing low self-esteem, she left college and took refuge playing video games in her room. In the spring of 2014, her father suggested she see a medical specialist, who diagnosed her with a form of autism, ADD (Attention Hyperactivity Disorder) and depression.



*Elizabeth "Liz" Clute is today back at Lansing Community College and studying to become a robotics mechanic, a field she's excited about.*

Nationally, 6.2 percent of youth (14-24) have a disability setting them up for greater challenges than their peers to achieve educational and career success. Youths with disabilities are less likely than their peers to complete high school, enter post-secondary education, obtain a bachelor's degree, and find jobs, according to the 2020 Youth Transition Report, by the Institute for Educational Leadership, and confirmed by Michigan experience. In Michigan, 28.3 percent of young people with disabilities complete some college compared to 47 percent of their peers, according to the report. The attainment rate for a four-year degree for young people with disabilities drops down to 2.6 percent compared to 8.5 percent for their peers; the state rate is slightly lower than the national average.

The gaps in education and workforce success are significant, even despite federal and state legislation and systemic efforts to improve opportunities, the report noted. But those achievement gaps could narrow if funding was adequately appropriated to meet the needs of transitioning youth and young adults with disabilities, the report opined.

**With support from family and others**, Liz Clute returned to LCC in 2017. A facilitator assistant from Clute's [ASPPiRE class](#), a social coaching program for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder founded at LCC, encouraged her to return to school to study robotics. She looked into it "to be polite," Clute said, but then discovered the coursework was more suited to her than the early childhood education classes she had previously enrolled in. LCC's Center for Student Access helped her get situated and provided a list of accommodations to share with instructors based on her diagnosis. Today, Clute talks exuberantly about becoming a robotics mechanic, and dreams of working with a technology named "Spot," a walking robot developed for dangerous construction zones that resembles a dog.

Among peers nationally, Liz Clute is fortunate because LCC has a [Center for Student Access](#) which works with students with disabilities by consulting with faculty and staff on their progress, and providing academic accommodations and supports, including reader services, interpreters, and quiet areas for test-taking. [Michigan Rehabilitation Services \(MRS\)](#), the agency that is responsible for special education services beyond K-12 (Michigan mandates services until age 26) partners with colleges and universities, but is focused on employment and is not always well connected to adult and post-secondary education.

Advocates say there's still a long way to go before most colleges and universities develop the kinds of targeted programs needed to help students with disabilities graduate and become self-sufficient. Nationally, nearly one-third of students with disabilities who start college drop out by their second year, said Dahlia Schaewitz, Vice President of Transition, Disability & Employment for the Institute for Educational Leadership.

"Here in Michigan, we know that our state's success and economic future depend on preparing all Michigan youth for post-secondary education, work and life, but too many of our young people aren't succeeding," said Michele Corey, Vice President for Programs at Michigan's Children. "Making sure that we assess needs of older youth so that we can put into place timely supports to help them through high school and continue into post-secondary and the workforce is essential to their success."

**As a small step**, Michigan's Children advocates for the state and schools to broaden efforts to ensure the completion of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for transitioning high school students, a requirement of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the appropriate transfer of student records to post-secondary providers.

Students with disabilities have a better chance for success in college and post-secondary programs if they have coordinated and comprehensive supports, said Michele Strasz, director of the Capital Area College Access Network (CapCan), a collaborative community network dedicated to increasing the college attainment rates for students of all abilities in the Lansing region. Academic help through accommodations and success coaches; social-emotional supports, including learning how to self-advocate and socialize with others; and organizational skill-building, including problem-solving are critical, she added. The network works with students starting in high school to expose them to future possibilities through college and career conferences, and tours of LCC and other college campuses. They also delve deeply into the needs of students with the lowest college going rates, including those with disabilities.



A common lament among families Strasz works with is the lack of a “warm hand-off” from high school to postsecondary programs for those students with an identified disability - whether a physical disability or most commonly, a cognitive disability such as learning disorders, autism, brain injury or Down’s syndrome, she said. In the K-12 grades, students with an identified disability typically have a team of people helping them -- special education staff, guidance counselors, and transition specialists, depending on a district’s resources. Those obligations borne under the federal IDEA legislation don’t exist at the college level where students must self-report their disability for the college to determine which accommodations (extra time on tests, note-taking support, or testing in quiet places) it can make, Strasz said. High school accommodations such as reducing the number of questions on a test, are not available in college because of accreditation standards. Under IDEA, families with children with disabilities are entitled to an equal education with early intervention and special education services, but that doesn’t extend to post-secondary education. For those transitioning to college, the American Disabilities Act governs against discrimination.

**Too often students** who have spent years self-consciously standing out in school for their disability and feeling stigmatized chose not to volunteer it in college to their disadvantage. As a result, they forgo any kind of assistance and that could prevent them from failing a class, costing them lost credits and time, and the expense of repeating classes. Often the financial consequences drive students with disabilities to drop out – a preventable outcome in Strasz’s view if the system was better designed to connect transitioning students to the next stage of their education.

Michigan’s promise that families with children with disabilities be provided educational services from birth through 26, starting with *Early On* services for babies and toddlers with disabilities and developmental delays, sets up these expectations as their children age. In addition, there is growing demand for services for people on the autism spectrum as a result of recent mandates for autism benefits. Strasz believes that families will continue to demand services as their children grow, ushering in expectations for better educational access and wrap-around services as students transition to post-secondary programs. “The wave is coming. It is up to us to create systems and funding mechanisms to provide for these services so that any student with a cognitive, mental or physical disability has the opportunity to continue to receive support, and education, and meaningful career preparation.”

In the past year, the Whitmer Administration’s goal to increase the number of working-age adults with a skill certificate or college degree from 45 percent to 60 percent by 2030 offers another incentive to fight to ensure young adults with disabilities are part of the picture, according to Corey and Strasz. This “60-by 30” goal is important in a state that ranks 33<sup>rd</sup> nationally for education attainment and is below average in the Great Lakes region. It is unknown how many students attending Michigan colleges and universities have a disability.

**Strasz recognizes the** need for better data in order to create responsive systems that aid transitioning students, and has spent the past seven years engaged with [LCC’s Coalition for College and Career Readiness \(C3R\)](#), an initiative including education, business, industry and community members, to improve college readiness and reduce the number of high school students in the region that require developmental coursework. “There isn’t a lot of good data out there. And because it’s self-reported at the higher-education level, it’s underreported,” she said.

Strasz said the work at LCC and other schools of higher education in Michigan gives her hope. LCC’s use of “success coaches” to help students with organizational skills, learn how to study and take notes, is

something all colleges and universities should employ for their students with disabilities. Its [Center for Student Access, specifically](#) designed to assist this student population, is considered integral to the college's work to build campus diversity. Approximately 500-600 students with disabilities seek out and register with the Center each semester, said Access Consultant Amanda Preston.

Among other Michigan examples of movement toward inclusive college campuses, Hope College in Holland has a short-term college experience named "Ready for Life" (Think College!) to help high schoolers with disabilities imagine their future college campus experience. In general, however, it's more common for universities rather than community colleges to offer services for students with disabilities largely because of the former's ability to attract grant dollars to help pay for them, Strasz said. Among the state's universities, Saginaw Valley University has an [Office of Accessibility Resources and Accommodations](#) to help students access accommodations and services. Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti and Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo are ranked among the [top 25 U.S. colleges](#) for people with autism, and Michigan State University has a burgeoning program for students on the autism spectrum.

**Toni Glasscoe, an Associate Vice President** for External Affairs, Development and K-12 Operations at LCC, said the work of C3R workgroup at LCC and Strasz at CapCAN has paved the way for a soon-to-emerge pilot program to more fully assist students with disabilities as they transition into college career, beginning with outreach to area high school students. Information gleaned from the experiences of parents and students – for example, learning that a certificate of participation versus a high school diploma won't lead to financial aid – has been invaluable. "We've had champions at our table for college and career readiness being patient, waiting for us to have the capacity to start working with students with differing abilities," she said. "The issue now is taking all these pieces and parts and creating a system our partners are aware of in high schools. Now we need to pull together a process and a pilot project that could include curriculum. It's an exciting time."