WKU heightens college accessibility through growing program

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David Horowitz September 3, 2025



Michael Matney, who oversees the SAV-Y program at Western Kentucky University, greets a student in his classroom on Tuesday, Sept. 2, in Gary Ransdell Hall.

Common pursuits at Western's SAV-Y program, for adult students with intellectual disabilities, include greater independence, postsecondary career paths, and community — but the aims vary by individual.

It's similar to people having different reasons for pursuing college degrees, but also different. SAV-Y is for people who wouldn't typically meet the criteria for traditional degree-seeking programs but seek a higher-education pathway and growth in adulthood through a three-year postsecondary program that, per the name, focuses on Social development, Academics and Vocational integration.

Drew Maxwell, whose ADHD and autism heighten impulsiveness while affecting attention span and focus, aims to work with cars. Claire Lanham, for whom certain concepts may require more repetition due to Down syndrome, plans to explore career options. Ashton Geriene, described as having the mindset of a 6-year-old, always wanted to work on a farm. Other enrollees, too, have their own unique lived experiences and circumstances — and at SAV-Y, the aim is to meet people where they're at.

"You meet one student with autism, you've met one student with autism; you may have met one student with Down syndrome, but they're not going to be like any other student who lives with Down syndrome," said Michael Matney, who oversees the program.

"I don't want parents to think, 'My student's disability means that they could never do that.'"

One year in, the program has quadrupled enrollment from two students to eight.

Two weeks in, students described SAV-Y as a program where they've found friendships and new postsecondary expectations different from programs such as high school.

SAV-Y is one of just six Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary programs statewide — initiatives enabling students with intellectual disabilities to take higher education courses where, without seeking a degree, they can qualify for financial aid.

SAV-Y Co-Founder Rheanna Plemons, the WKU Assistant Provost for Accreditation and Assessment, said she co-founded it partily due to the limited number of opportunities typically available for enrollees aiming to pursue higher education within the region. And, she said, a CPT opens the door to access financial aid and workforce competencies that can help them find employment.

Year-one SAV-Y students take program courses on social skills as well as general education courses that benefit those skills and social life on campus, program Matney said. Year two entails classes in an academic area of interest as well as more SAV-Y classes in finance, health, and independence. Third-years take SAV-Y classes, two career track courses and at least one internship per semester for on-the-job experience in the academic area they chose to pursue.

While courses can be taken for credit, they're usually audited. Students earn what are known as micro-credentials, competency-based recognitions of accomplishments. For websites and apps such as LinkedIn, SAV-Y enrollees can attach micro-credential badges to their resumes for each year they complete, along with indicators of competencies in specific areas, and a final, larger badge upon program completion.

The students, who must have a documented intellectual disability, are required to attend and participate in class regularly. The program also requires that enrollees be able to express themselves verbally or nonverbally, and it states that there's a preference for applying students to be able to navigate campus as independently as possible. (However, Matney said, students — disability or not — generally struggle to navigate campus as freshmen, and the ability to navigate campus can be scaffolded as students learn about the campus.)

Orlanden Frazier, for instance, reads at a middle school level, and in high school would get passes on homework and tests due to his Individual Education Plan. In contrast, his mother LeeAnn Crabtree said, Frazier has homework for the first time in years — and the program presents new challenges and opportunities.

Frazier said he's liking his classes so far, and attending them across campus means he walks a wide area during the day — with friends, he added — in a way he couldn't as a student at high school, where the facility was more confined for security and safety. He described going, last week, from Gary Ransdell Hall to the football stadium: "It felt freeing, and it also felt nice."

Drew Maxwell, the student aiming to work with cars, said he hopes SAV-Y helps him become successful, find the job he wants, make money, be independent and live on his own.

Classes have gone pretty well so far, and the program offers more freedom than Maxwell had in high school, he said. There's also been a standout moment, where he approached a classmate to introduce himself after class: "I never have run up to someone like that," he said.

Having autism and ADHD means for Maxwell that he can get angry when overstimulated and impulsive about what he wants. And, he said, it means others often better understand how he's feeling.

He also homes in on his passions. On a Friday morning, he excitedly shared a collection of 11 handmade miniature paper car models that, over time, has advanced over time: Each has transformation capabilities, from an orange Jeep that transforms into a speed boat, to a truck with a trailer that turns into an ATV.

"We want to give him every opportunity to achieve what he wants in life," his father Scott Maxwell said.

Claire Lanham, who has Down syndrome and plans to explore classes, said the program is going well so far, as she likes working hard in the classes. With a recent scholarship from the Buddy House, she's the first student with Down syndrome to enroll in the program.

Making more friends, she added, is her favorite part.

And for Ashton Geriene, the student aiming to work on a farm, the classes don't come quickly enough.

"He can't get up (…) and out the door fast enough," his mother Jessica Geriene said of his classes.

He's extremely social — he'll run up to anyone and introduce himself and talk about his favorite movies — and the best part, for him, are his new friends, he said. Jessica Geriene said they can't go five minutes on campus without a passerby chatting him up.

"He has a lot of people that look out for him … And as a parent, we can't be prouder," she said.

Growing up with different mental and physical limitations from his peers sucked, Geriene said. Schools didn't let him on sports teams, and he was bullied, his mother said.

She enrolled him in SAV-Y so he could have experiences more common among students his age in college, she said. The family was planning to leave their home in Washington state when they found the program and moved to Bowling Green so he could attend.

"If you were to go back his freshman year and tell me that he was going to go to college, I probably wouldn't believe you," Jessica Geriene said. " We didn't know that this was even an option for us — for him."

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