

Building an Oasis

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and Tiffany Lopes

Pace's OASIS program offers comprehensive support for students with learning differences, preparing them not just for the classroom, but for life after graduation.

STEPPING OFF THE CROWDED elevator of 161 William Street and onto the sundrenched 10th floor is a refreshing experience. There's scattered chatter, rustling papers, and the occasional burst of laughter. This peaceful environment is nothing like the turbulent industrial landscape just outside, but that's the point. It can be difficult for college students to find a safe haven to escape to—particularly for those who attend classes on Pace's NYC Campus—but for students with learning differences, those hurdles can increase tenfold.

Welcome to OASIS.

According to the CDC, autism affects 1 in 68 children in the United States, up from 1 in 150 in 2010. What's more, an estimated 35% of young adults (ages 19–23) with autism have not had a job or received postgraduate education after leaving high school. That's where Pace's OASIS program comes in. Designed for students with high-functioning autism spectrum

disorders, learning differences, and nonverbal learning differences, the Ongoing Academic and Social Instructional Support (OASIS) program is one of the most comprehensive support programs in the country. "It doesn't just look at academics—it looks at the whole person. All of our students are Pace students first," explained Janet Mulvey, PhD, program director. "They want to be matriculated, full-time students, and they have to meet the same criteria as every other student in the University."

They attend the same classes, complete the same coursework, and are held to the same standards as the rest of their class. Once accepted, all OASIS students receive one-on-one academic coaching (an hour a day, four times a week), access to weekly social meetups, invites to employment-ready workshops, and even housing assistance. Not to mention pizza Fridays.

"It was a trial that first year," Julie Saccoccio told us, reflecting on the program's inception. She's the program

administrator and a dedicated advocate for the OASIS student body. "They really didn't know if it was going to go anywhere. We had four students who worked with four faculty, and they did extremely well. The second year, we had 11 students—and it just grew from there."

The idea was conceived in 2003 by a parent and special education professor. They called it the BOSS Program, but

the name was shared by countless other initiatives across the country. So when the team began to grow, they realized the need for an acronym that stood out, yet at the same time, one that encapsulated the vital work that they were doing.

"The name is very appropriate for our students who could really use a break from

some of the bustle that goes on at the main building," said Zachary O'Neal '16, an OASIS alumnus and social coach, who is now serving the very program that supported his own journey. The everyday sights and sounds that most people take for granted can transform into an overwhelming combination of frightening crowds, in-

timidating noises, and overbearing lights for people with autism—and

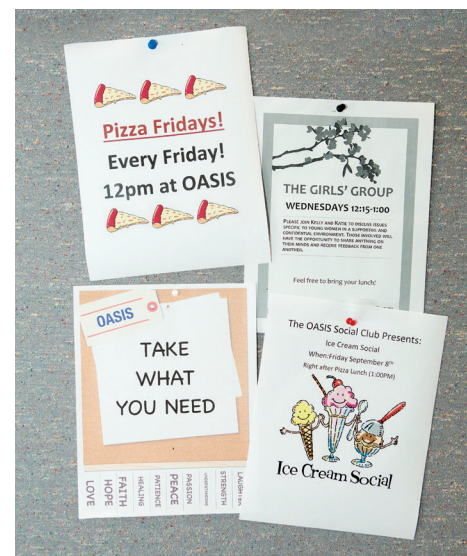
the dedicated space at 161 William Street offers a welcome respite.

Over the last nine years, OASIS has experienced tremendous growth, both in number of students and support staff—which has allowed the program to further its mission of catering to the unique needs of each student—and in academics, emotional support, social integration, and career readiness.

OASIS's educational coordinator supports students as they select and sign



Academic coaches like Iris Stevens [left] meet with students one hour a day to assist them with assignments, organization, and management of their studies. Pizza Fridays and other social events [bottom] provide students with a fully immersive experience into the Pace Community—both on and off campus.



“It’s about making these students feel comfortable. By giving them the space—the oasis—to grow and mature.”

up for classes. Its academic coaches receive copies of each syllabus for every class the student is enrolled, act as their liaisons to professors, and meet with the student one hour each day to ensure time management and organization skills are being developed.

“We help them advocate for themselves,” says Academic Coach Iris Stevens.

Licensed social workers are there for emotional support—addressing any issues that may arise in the student’s life, wherein they offer support in both private and group settings. Campus life coordinators

not only assist in selecting roommates, but also in navigating the trials and tribulations sometimes faced by all students who reside on campus. Social coaches teach what’s called “social literacy” in the form of an experiential summer program, while social coordinators spearhead full integration into Pace activities.

Vocational coordinators have undergone the most development since Mulvey’s arrival.

“The initiative of starting this year with second-semester freshmen is something we

felt would be better so that we can slowly transition them toward independence,” she said. Mulvey is referring to the OASIS internship program, which was recently extended. Students are now expected to volunteer for 20 hours a semester earlier, a boon that will prove critical to their success after graduation. “Many of our students have never had the opportunity to have a so-called job, even if it’s a volunteer job. The volunteer experience goes with mock interviews—we do everything to ready them for employment.”

Students in the OASIS program attend workshops to prepare for what is often-times a complex job hunt and interview process. By junior year, they’re working at

an unpaid internship. By the time senior year rolls around, they’re landing paid internships. It’s all in the pursuit of independence—and the OASIS team is constantly adapting the program to suit the needs of each individual student.

“The students that have recently graduated, if they don’t have a job, are invited to come back to OASIS for no fee to meet with our career counselor,” said Mulvey. “So it’s all-inclusive as far as those that are here and those that have recently graduated who aren’t working.” And already this new program has resulted in jobs.

Of all the challenges they face, deciding on a major has proven to be a significant roadblock. And not because OASIS students are in any way indecisive.

“There’s a notion that everyone on the Autism spectrum is into technology,” said Mulvey. “That’s not true. They’re just as varied as the rest of the University.” Of the expected graduates this year, only one is on track to enter into a STEM field. The rest are pursuing everything from business to journalism to farming, while a few others are now overseas through Pace’s study abroad program.

It’s a success story that’s absolutely accessible to everyone; whether on a large scale, by way of implementing similar programs into higher education, or on an individual one, starting with faculty and fellow Pace peers. “It’s about making these students feel comfortable. By giving them the space—the oasis—to grow and mature,” said O’Neal.

What’s the most rewarding part about working on the OASIS team? Offering each student the tools with which to become independent, and seeing them flourish. Mulvey says, “When those students smile, and those students are happy, and those students feel comfortable, or they say ‘Oh, I can do this,’ I think that’s one of our proudest moments.”

Center; and prepared for his internship with the OASIS work readiness program.

As a member of Pace’s award-winning Model UN Team, Sharif represented Iraq on high-level political forum/sustainable development at the NYC National Model UN Conference this year, where his team was recognized with an Honorable Mention Delegation Award, an experience he calls “life-changing.”

Earlier this year, he took a field study course on ecosystems and biodiversity in Ecuador, traveling to the Galapagos Islands, snorkeling, hiking, and exploring pottery. This fall, Sharif is spending a semester abroad in Barcelona, Spain, immersing himself in history and culture, and taking the opportunity to travel around Europe and northern Africa.

“I feel like I am following the path of what I have to do in order to succeed, break through the walls, and to pursue my dreams to become the man I want to be,” he says.

Meet David Sharif ’19

“A professional world traveler, passionate to raise autism awareness, participate in conferences on human rights, and also to work for an organization that helps kids on the spectrum.”

If you asked an average college student to describe themselves, you’d probably get a very different description. But David Sharif is nothing short of extraordinary.

As a teen, he accomplished much more than most: valedictorian of his high school class, a spokesperson for Autism Speaks, and even served as the voice in “My Name is David,” a video which illustrates the interests, struggles, skills, and accomplishments of people with autism.

At Pace, he’s made the Dean’s List; participated in the Political Science Society, Study Abroad Club, and LGBTQA and Social Justice

A Parent Perspective

Nancy Garvey, PhD, a member of the Board of Trustees and parent of an OASIS graduate, shares how the OASIS program has impacted her family.

As a parent of a son with autism, what is one thing you want people to know?

As is true for all children, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) encompasses a full range of abilities and outcomes and I don’t think the individual on the spectrum knows the full extent of his or her abilities until they start to mature and come to more fully understand their symptoms. For my son, this happened when he was in college. There are so many people with ASD who have made major and minor contributions to the world that you should help your son or daughter be everything they can be. People on the spectrum range from the famous, like Temple Grandin, James Durbin, and Dan Akroyd, to those who enrich other people’s lives just through knowing them.

When your family was considering higher ed, how did Pace and the OASIS program distinguish itself from other programs?

At the time, there were very few college programs in the country that specifically focused on students with ASD. One of the best things about the entry to the Pace program from my son’s perspective was that it required you to apply and be admitted to Pace before applying for admission to the OASIS program. This was important because my son had been in a few other programs and felt the staff and

the program condescended to the participants. Here, he was being treated as an equal.

How have you seen the OASIS support method benefit your son?

The one-on-one coaching and responsiveness to the individual were instrumental in my son’s success. After a couple of years, he and his coach drew a graph of my son’s progress. In the beginning, the slope showing time against progress, was flat. Over time the slope of the line became positive and progressively steeper. That’s what you want to see result from participating in a program like this. That is the journey.

You were able to hug your son as he crossed the stage at Commencement in 2016 with a Pace diploma in his hand. How would you describe that moment?

When I saw my son cross the stage and I hugged him, I was happy for him. He had accomplished what he wanted. Of course I was proud of him, but what I learned was that this was not a moment that was about me. It was a moment that was about him and hence, my happiness for him.

What would you say to a fellow parent and their student who are considering OASIS?

Remember that everyone is different, especially students with ASD, and everyone travels at their own pace. I believe the more individualized the program, the more successful its students will be. The OASIS program has an excellent track record and a long history of proving that that is the case.