

Roberts Wesleyan College's BELL Program Celebrates 10 Years of Milestones



BELL students at commencement in 2019. Lily Hoeflin'19 gives a "shout out" to graduates.

In 2010, current Chief Academic Officer Dr. David Basinger helped oversee a BOCES 2 transition classroom that provided an on-campus location for students with special needs.

As chair of the Roberts Division of Teacher Education, Basinger was approached by the Institute for Innovative Transition with an exciting opportunity for the college: Roberts was one of four local institutions chosen to receive a Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) grant. The funding would allow the college to develop unique programming that fully integrated with the students' campus life.

The grant fostered a new partnership between Roberts Wesleyan College, Monroe 2 Orleans BOCES and adult service provider CP Rochester that became the Bridge to Earning, Learning and Living (BELL) program.

"We're a small campus and also Christ-centered," interim BELL Program Director Donna Graham said. "This environment allows for a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere for students with disabilities to excel and grow."

The BELL program is a postsecondary certificate program offered to students ages 18-26 with intellectual and developmental disabilities who are transitioning into adulthood. It focuses on providing authentic and inclusive experiences both academically and socially to prepare students with the vocational skills necessary for sustainable and gainful employment.

While the program's leadership has changed over the past 10 years—from Basinger to Kym Woodard and now to Donna Graham—its goals and mission remain clear. Specifically, the

program is designed to facilitate education for character, fostering personal growth and transformation through the development of core academic, social and vocational competencies that prepare students for the workforce and to contribute in meaningful ways to the greater community.



David Basinger, chief academic officer congratulates Dalton Letta (2016).



BELL Students with President Porterfield and Ann Costello, executive director of the Golisano Foundation taken at the BELL Ceremony in 2016.



David Basinger, Deana Porterfield, Ann Costello and Kym Woodard.

"Just like any college education prepares any traditional student, it is a complex holistic opportunity of interconnected experiences that educates the individual," former BELL Program Director and current Assistant to the Vice President Kym Woodard said. "Personal transformation happens through community connections, classroom experiences, work opportunities, personal challenges and success. All of this adds up to better readiness for the workplace, community and civic engagement after college."



Julianne Warren'18 (BELL) and Alexis Hernandez'18 (Homeland Security and Psychology. Current Doctor of Psychology student). Adam Tharrett'19 (BELL).

Since 2010, the program has continued to evolve to help students thrive and deliver more fully inclusive experiences, including providing more on-campus residential living and employment options so BELL students can experience what it's like working and living in a true college environment. Over the years, there's also been an increased involvement with other key divisions of the college, including Roberts athletic programs and campus security.



BELL Athletics.

Aside from reaching the coveted 10-year anniversary mark, one of the most significant milestones for the program was achieved in 2016, when five BELL students marched in a Roberts commencement ceremony for the first time, making the inclusive ceremony a first for Rochester.

"There's nothing more satisfying to me as Chief Academic Officer than to see students become thoughtful, service-oriented individuals who will impact the world for good," Basinger said. "And this is what the BELL program continues to do."

BELL program graduates have gone on to secure gainful part- or full-time employment opportunities in many different fields, including, retail, security, manufacturing and much more. BELL program alumnus Dalton Letta is just one of many incredible success stories and an example of someone who continues to advocate in support of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities to help increase understanding of how to value different abilities.

Letta is founder of Campaign D, a network of organizations in support of autism awareness that breaks down stereotypes and celebrates the abilities of individuals of all ages. He is also actively pursuing his passion for theater and drama, which he cultivated during his time in the BELL program.



Dalton Letta'16 at commencement. Dalton Letta surrounded by his family (2016).

As for the next 10 years, Graham, Woodard and Basinger share a similar vision for the program's continued sustainability and inclusivity. According to Basinger, "professors and students have grown in their understanding and sense of community through their inclusive interaction with BELL students."

"I'd like to continue growing in numbers so more students with disabilities are able to benefit and grow from an authentic college experience," Graham said.

Woodard believes BELL has played an important role in the Greater Rochester area to build a healthy model of what inclusive higher education looks like, which she hopes will continue to break down barriers and create new opportunities for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities for years to come.

"BELL has provided me with professional growth and personal formation that I never could have imagined," Woodard said. "I pray that it will continue to impact lives in a way that brings understanding, compassion and a new way of considering each individual's unique and important contributions to the community."