

**Opening Doors to College: Film Screening and  
Panel Discussion with Dan Habib  
Framingham State University  
March 25, 2021**

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>> **James Cressey:** Hello, everyone. I'd like to welcome you today. We have a wonderful group here. My name's James Cressey. I'm an Associate Professor of Education here at Framingham State University. And the Coordinator of the Chris Walsh Center. And I'm really happy to have this group. I'm also the Zoom host, so I'll just say a couple of things about technology today.

If you are one of our panelists or facilitators or ASL interpreters, I believe I've made you a cohost. That should allow you to turn on your camera or unmute. Please send me a message if you need anything from me. And participants, you'll be able to unmute yourselves later to ask questions with our panel. But you're welcome to use the chat. I see a lot of people are already in the chat.

And then the raise hand feature if you need that as well. Also this event is being recorded and closed captioning is available. And I think those were all of my introductory announcements. So we're so pleased to be here today. This event is cosponsored by a couple of different organizations at Framingham State. So the Chris Walsh Center for Educators and Families of MetroWest is cosponsoring this event, and we're really happy to have so many, you know, folks here today.

I think we have Framingham State faculty, staff, students as well as many people from the community, parents and caregivers and educators and other professionals out there from the community. So that's our mission is to provide supports to all of those folks with a focus on students with disabilities, students who are gifted or advanced learners, and others with unmet needs.

So we love having Dan Habib. This is his third appearance with Framingham State, and we are really happy to be here tonight. And I'll introduce Ashley Luce to tell you a little bit about the other office that's sponsoring this event.

>> **Ashley:** So my name's Ashley, I'm the diverse scholars program coordinator.

It's located in the center For Academic Success and Achievement at Framingham State. So the diverse scholars program is part of the statewide MAICEI, which stands for the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative. I'm sure we'll be talking about that initiative later. But it's an initiative that serves students with intellectual and developmentally disabilities.

And allows them to attend college and, you know, participate in college coursework, internships and student life.

>> **James Cressey:** So without further ado, I will introduce our guests tonight and facilitator of the rest of the event, Dan Habib. He is the creator awardwinning films such as "Including Samuel," and "Who Cares About Kelsey" which were screened on campus and "Intelligent Lives" which we screened last month and many other short films. He's also project director at UNH on institute on disability. His films have been translated into 17 languages and used worldwide to support inclusive education and disability rights.

And I'll let Dan tell you more about himself, but with that, I will turn it over to you, Dan. Welcome and thank you for being here.

>> **Dan Habib:** Great. Thank you so much, James, Ashley. It's so great to be with everybody tonight. We have a great turnout. We have about 60 people joining us tonight. I'm going to be showing the film quite soon, Opening Doors to College, but I just want to give you a little background. Framingham was good enough to see that this was a film that could highlight keys and disadvantages of people with disabilities going to college.

It's an issue I really care about but occasionally another organization reaches out to me and says we want to tell our story and we want you to film it and make a film. So I was really happy that Temple University reached out. You'll be hearing about Think College tonight. It's a network of colleges around the country. I know Framingham is a part of that that is creating pathways for students with intellectual disability and autism to go to college.

Students of all kinds of disabilities can go to college and should have that as an opportunity. But this Think College Network is specific to students with intellectual disability and autism. So I spent quite a bit of time in these two colleges showing, you know, what it was like for a student to go to school, to live on campus, to take courses, to interact with friends, join extracurricular activities.

What were the challenges? What were the benefits? Not just to the student with disability but the student without disabilities as well. Who are learning alongside them. So just before I show the film, I just want to mention a couple of real brief things. First of all, the film was all created with federal funding. It was supported by this

Pennsylvania Inclusive Higher Education Consortium, but this whole network of schools which are often referred to as TIPSID schools is part of an ongoing federal grant. So it's real exciting that the federal government has been supporting these opportunities for students with disabilities to go to college.

I want you to just think about a couple things as you watch the film. We're going to have a great panel afterwards that you'll meet right after the film's over. We're going to talk about some of the specific issues and reflections they have, some of them from personal experience going to school,

About what they saw in the film and their own lives. But it would be wonderful if you feel like typing occasionally in the chat the answers to these questions. I'll type these questions in the chat. The four people are called Missy, Curtis, Janet and Fudia. As it's playing out, think about what's helping them succeed in college. What about themselves? What about the people around them? What about the philosophies of the school, et cetera?

Also, think about how are these four students benefiting from the college experience? So if you think of something that you notice any time, just throw that in the chat. And finally, how do nondisabled students benefit from learning alongside students with disabilities?

So, again, I'll pull these questions in the chat. If you want to just sit back and watch, that's totally fine. But we always love to see people's thoughts and engage in dialogue over the course of the movie. I'll say one just quick thing about the accessibility that's designed into this movie. I caption all my movies and I only show movies that are open captioned. So there will be captions on the movie.

But also we audio describe a number of our movies. What that means if someone is blind or visually impaired, you'll hear a voice reading any text on the screen and at times describing what's happening in the film. So to some people that can be a little overwhelming to have different, you know, people talking the whole time, but it's the most accessible way that we can show a film, and so I believe strongly in accessibility, and that's why we show it that way.

So with that I'm going to share the film. It's about 36 minutes long. And then right afterwards, we're going to have what I think is going to be a fantastic discussion with the panel and with all of you. And if you do have questions as we go, specific questions that you want me or the panel to address or anyone at Framingham, please type them into the chat, and we'll be monitoring the chat, and we'll be collecting all those questions and make sure to address as many as possible during the open Q&A at the end.

All right. So enjoy Opening Doors to College.  
(film shown)

**>> Dan Habib:** Well, hello, everyone. I hope you enjoyed that film. I'm really excited to talk with you about it, really excited to have our panel join us. I wanted to point out a couple of things before I introduce the panel. If you go into the chat now, I

just posted two links. One is a link to a Dropbox folder I put together with eight PDFs that I think are among the best resources for higher education.

I also put into the chat the Opening Doors to College film. This film, as I said, was funded through a federal grant. It's free for you to watch, share, however you'd like to share it. So if you want to just take a look at the website, the Opening Doors to College website, it looks like this. And right in the middle there's a player. And there's also a panel discussion we had with the people who were featured in the film, which is fun if you want to watch that.

And also a film trailer. I also want to point out there's a couple other important sites. The site for Think College is thinkcollege.net and that's the umbrella site for all the programs around the country that are particularly geared towards students with disabilities to go to college. If you do a college search, you can look for your state, and assuming probably many of you are in Massachusetts, you can see there are 19 programs just in Massachusetts.

But travel all over the country and check it out. And then the Dropbox link that I mentioned has all these PDFs that I put in here. All of them, I think, are really valuable, but this one is a long guide, but it is incredibly comprehensive. Every year the U.S. Department of Education puts out this transition guide, and it's a guide to postsecondary education and employment students for students with disabilities.

But it's really well organized. There's a ton of information in there. And you can download that. So those of you, there are a lot of people who before this webinar said they wanted resources and we're giving you those. There's a lot of resources here. I know the Framingham folks are going to continue to put resources in the chat. So without further ado, really excited to have our panel come together now and be ready to share their thoughts and experiences. So I'm going to just share my screen that has some bio information on each panelist. So I'm going to invite -- make sure all the panelists have their cameras on. Just because of the way Zoom is set up and there's a lot of people here, I might not see you all, but I'm going to keep an eye out.

First I want to introduce Adam Benincaso. Hopefully you can see Adam with his brother and mother in the frame here. Adam Benincaso attended Framingham State's diverse scholars program in 2018 and 2019. He's currently enrolled in Hopkinton's 18 to 22-year-old transition program. He enjoys movies, walks and socializing with friends and family. He loves comics and his favorite trip is to Boston's Comicon every summer. His brother, Aamir, is his brother, is a senior at Framingham State. He worked at the Boys and Girls Club of Framingham supporting young learners overcome academic obstacles and hopes to advocate for people with disabilities.

He enjoys tennis, fishing and taking his brother on hikes in nature. And then finally we have Amy Imrana. Amy Benincaso is a pharmacist and graduate of Massachusetts college of pharmacy in Boston. She's practiced community pharmacy for over 30 years and takes pride in helping others, especially those who need assistance navigating the various aspects of raising a child with special needs.

She currently practices for an independent community pharmacy in Wellesley, Mass. She wants to engage pharmacy leaders into developing programs that allow this diverse population access to work/life development. And our last two panelists, the first is Holly Pearson. Holly Pearson is a faculty at the Framingham State University Sociology and Education Department. She identifies as deaf, disables, queer transracial/transnational adoptee. She does not have preferred pronouns.

Much of her scholarship is influenced by their experiences growing up navigating the spectrum such as spoken English culture to Deaf cup tour with a capital D, spoken English to ASL, American sign language, Asian, AsianAmerican, adoptee community, and western culture and community norms. And she got used to those identities very early on. Growing up she felt like an oddball which she now embraces and takes the light within.

So, so glad Holly's with us. Finally, is April Yuen. April is an AmeriCorps member at City Year Boston. She is currently working with 9th grade students and a Framingham State alumni graduating in 2020. She worked as a peer mentor during her senior year where her interest is working with students and the field of education has grown while being in that line of work.

So the way we're going to do things is I'm going to ask two questions of the panel. And then we'll just go through the panel and have them all ask -- answer, excuse me. Meanwhile, as you have questions, comments, anything you want to make sure we address before 8:30 tonight when we're going to close, I encourage you to put those into the chat so that we can be sure to address them after each panelist has a chance to weigh in a little bit.

And I'm going to read the question and then I'm going to stop sharing so if you'd like, go on speaker view in Zoom in the top right and you can then see whoever is speaking a little more clearly. So I'm going to start with Adam. And Adam, the question for you is what person or themes resonated for you in the film?

**>> Adam Benincaso:** I really enjoyed my time at Framingham State University. I like Curtis in the movie, I don't like online classes. I like being with everyone and learning with all the other students. I enjoy eating lunch at the McCarthy Center and making new friends, just like Missy.

I had some amazing professors who taught me about nutrition and cultural anthropology and hospitality and tourism. All of my professors were friendly and kind.

**>> Dan Habib:** Excellent. Thank you, Adam. Thank you so much. Great, great answer. And I'm glad you were able to relate to Curtis. He's a good guy, I can tell you firsthand, having spent time with him. Aamir, can you answer the same question? What person or themes resonated for you in the film?

**>> Aamir Benincaso:** Like Curtis -- like Adam, Curtis really resonated in the film to me. He mentioned that the professor supported him which gave him confidence to

come out of his shell and feel successful, which is extremely important. So many people -- I feel like that many people alienate individuals with disabilities that hinders their ability to come out and express themselves, which is so important.

So personally as an older brother, it made me very happy that Adam was interacting with all the students. Like, he was, like, the big man on campus. He would just say hello to everyone he sees, interact, even in high school, he would interact with everyone. He would always say, oh, hello. How are you? And then, oh, what's your name? And then what classes are you taking?

>> **Adam Benincaso:** Yeah, that's what I say all the time.

>> **Aamir Benincaso:** So he would always do that. And then having him on my college campus made my college experience even greater because it gave me -- it made me feel a lot happier that there are accepting diverse scholars and that they're including them. And that's very important.

>> **Dan Habib:** Yeah. Thank you, Aamir and Adam. Really well said, both of you. And I'm sure, Amy, you probably share some of the same feelings of happiness of seeing both your guys being included and feeling, having such a rich college experience. So from your own perspective as a parent, what resonated for you in the film?

>> **Amy Benincaso:** Well, as a parent, I never imagined that there would be a program that allowed Adam to go to college, and it really made us very happy. And when the school told us that he's a good candidate for the program at Framingham State, we were thrilled for him. Because really, integration is the key. You know, we started integrating him when he was 3 years old, and it continued throughout high school.

And when the integration, you know, wasn't so, you know, wasn't so great in high school, you know, we worked together as a team to get him integrated by taking, you know, teachers who would, you know, welcome Adam and, you know, taking the same courses over and over again that he was interested in.

And that worked, you know. So I think the Hopkinton school system did a great job integrating Adam, and that led to success because just like Professor Newville and Brady said, if you separate them, it's very restrictive and oppressive. You know, all of those students in that film, you know, were proud to go to college, and they were happy, and they flowered and blossomed with confidence. And that's what you can hope, you know, the best for your child, you know.

>> **Dan Habib:** Were you nervous at all, just briefly, about sending your kids off to college?

>> **Amy Benincaso:** I was but, you know what? There was so much support, and Aamir was right on campus, that if I was nervous about anything, I know that he would

step in for us and, you know, they sent -- we had peer mentors, you know, we had lovely professors who were so accepting, and we had the staff at Hopkinton High School who were phenomenal.

And he loved being on campus. I mean, that was his favorite thing, you know? You could tell that he was on campus because he'd walk in with a smile on his face.

>> **Aamir Benincaso:** Yeah.

>> **Amy Benincaso:** And that says it all to me.

>> **Dan Habib:** Great. I'm going to come back to you in a little bit. Thank you for your wonderful perspectives. Holly, I'm going to come to you next and ask that question. What resonated for you in the film? A person? A theme? Anything like that?

>> **Holly Pearson:** Yeah. Hello. This is Holly. I really appreciated how the film started off from the beginning really acknowledging the education, it wasn't for everyone from the beginning. It really was for a very particular elite white Christian male. That was what education was for. And we have to give acknowledge and recognize that because even today, we still don't all have equal access to education.

So I appreciated the film just right off the start just acknowledged that. The other part that also relates to that is also recognizing that why do something the same way over and over and expecting a different result. It just does not work that way. And sometimes it's a really simple question of, hey. Maybe I should take a step back and see how I can meet the individual that doesn't have access to education or is struggling in education.

What are their thoughts? What are their needs? What do they want out of it? Rather than I myself assuming that this is what education looks like. So in other words, thinking about how to meet them rather than having them meet our standards and expectations.

>> **Dan Habib:** Yeah. That's a great point. And do you, as a faculty, as a member, do you try and -- I assume you try and do that as a teacher. You try and meet students where they're at. Is that part of your mission?

>> **Holly Pearson:** Yeah, very much so. I'm a strong believer that everyone is basically within the classroom space who has so much knowledge and experience. I am not the only expert as a faculty member. And I actually don't really identify as an instructor in class. I see myself as a cofacilitator with all of the folks in the space.

>> **Dan Habib:** Great. Thank you, Holly. We'll come back to you in a bit. April, thanks for joining us. You've had different roles, but one of them is a peer and doing some peer work with other students at Framingham. So talk to me about that perspective and what in the film resonated for you, a theme or a certain person or a

scene?

>> **April Yuen:** Mostly the theme was for me that I got was getting the students the support, the opportunity, and then just allowing themselves to really express themselves without having any restriction and just let them be who they are. I don't think we give enough of that in school, whether it's high school or college, or even especially in the workplace, it's very confined and restrictive.

So that was, like, the main theme that I kept seeing. And then I still resonated with Curtis, especially when he said in his semester he was able to, like, get out of his comfort zone. And for me it took a while to do that. It wasn't until junior, senior year of college. And I'm right now currently in work. I'm starting to getting out of my comfort zone, but it takes time.

>> **Dan Habib:** So for people that don't know much about the whole peer model that you were a part of at Framingham, can you just explain what that was like, kind of how you participated in that?

>> **April Yuen:** The Diverse Scholar Program, right?

>> **Dan Habib:** Yeah, yeah.

>> **April Yuen:** It was more like I think of it as, like, a coach. You know, being with the students. I don't know how to explain it. Being with the students and then just, like, supporting them in what they -- and just being there. I don't know.

>> **Dan Habib:** What were some of the ways you showed support? How did you provide support, and how did you maybe even receive something in return, you know, benefit in return?

>> **April Yuen:** One, I just allowed them to express who -- I didn't, like, question anything. I didn't even -- like, I didn't ask. I just let them. And then if they wanted to share something, then I would just go along with it. And then I'm trying to remember since it's been a while, too. But then also just engaging with their conversation and just being there as, like, not probably seen as a coach maybe in their eyes but being there as a friend as well.

So they know they can have someone to lean on, that I'm just not there for work or as a coach, but I'm just here as a person as well.

>> **Dan Habib:** Yeah. That's great. I mean, going to college, I remember, it's really nerveracking in terms of making friends and wondering if you're going to make friends right away and having somebody that starts to make those connections early on is really important, you know? And sometimes people with disabilities like my son, Samuel, it takes a little longer to connect sometimes.

So I think that was great you were there to be somewhat of a connector. And while



you have an opportunity a bit to talk more about those things along those lines. Let me come back to Adam again and ask a second round of questions. So Adam, let me just share my screen again real quick, and I'll show everyone the second question. Can you share a personal experience or two that relates to something you saw in the film? So something that you yourself experienced in college.

>> **Adam Benincaso:** I was able to work at the Whitmore library on campus and help the staff put away books. I was able to work out at the campus gym with my peer mentors. I also learned how to use a commuter bus on campus. In class after I presented my final project in nutrition, all of the students cheered and clapped for me. I would like to go back to college to study history and science someday.

>> **Dan Habib:** Are you starting to work towards that? Are you hoping that you might go back in the next year or two to college?

>> **Adam Benincaso:** Hoping next year -- hoping next year.

>> **Dan Habib:** Do you have anything specific in mind? Any specific school or region that you want to go to?

>> **Adam Benincaso:** Framingham State. Framingham State.

>> **Dan Habib:** Nice. So you wouldn't mind going right back to Framingham. That speaks well. That's great. Aamir, do you want to add and talk about your own personal experience or two that really made you think of that experience when you watched the film?

>> **Aamir Benincaso:** Personally, when Adam received his letter, when he opened it, he was just so happy. He was running around. He was, like, yeah! Well, I 100%, we went out, we went to celebrate. And just like Curtis, my mom, my dad and me, we 100% support him. We're always at his side.

And then something very special, actually, was when we, after we enrolled in the same class, we weren't at the same time, he was the morning class. I was the afternoon. But the professor's name was Professor Alberti. The class was called cultural anthropology. And I thought that Professor Alberti was a role model professor for the diverse college program.

He made sure he was involved, contributed. And then he told me a couple of funny stories of how he participated and he's, like, oh. And I was shocked. I was, like, wow! Really? He was, like, yeah, he did. And I'm, like, oh, that's awesome. So that will always be part of my experience because that was very personal.

So it is important for professors to adjust and reflect on how they teach students, in general. There are many students who have silent disabilities that need extra support. By having the Diverse Scholars Program, they're in class the professor may learn techniques to help other students, and they might learn something from being part of

the Diverse Scholars Program.

>> **Dan Habib:** Mmhmm. And before I jump to Amy, I just want to remind people, we really want to make sure your questions get answered about anything around college and students with disabilities. Going to college, about Framingham specifically or Diverse Scholars Program. So please use the chat. We'll also enable you to be unmuted after we get through this last round of questions of the panel.

And then you can ask the question verbally. But we really do want to address anything at all that you want to talk about tonight. But let me come back to Amy and ask you the same thing. Do you have a personal experience or two that really made you think about it once you saw the film or just in general about the college experience for your kids?

>> **Amy Benincaso:** Well, I feel like that Framingham State really opened the doors for both of my sons. You know, the look on his face when he received that acceptance letter was priceless. And every parent has hopes and dreams for their child. You know, this one came through. And I was so happy.

You know, and he enjoyed his experience. Adam wants to be with people -- all of us want to be with people. And if you look at, you know, the pandemic isolated a lot of people, and I feel like, you know, that showed others how, you know, our own personal experience, when you have disabilities in the family, a lot of doors are closed, and you are more isolated.

You know, as the world sees, it doesn't work. We're not happy when we're isolated. We're happy when we're with people interacting, learning from each other, being nice to each other. You know, through that, you can gain so many skills. And that's the whole point. Just like the movie said, you want to make sure that your children are prepared for real life.

And integrating them is a key to that.

>> **Dan Habib:** Yeah.

>> **Amy Benincaso:** So I am really thankful to all of the professors, peer mentors and students, you know, who embrace my son. And I also thank you for making films, you know, that spread social awareness and gives parents hope.

>> **Dan Habib:** Thank you. Well, that's why I do it, exactly. And before I jump to Holly, I want to make sure people know that there are financial support approaches also for people who are going to college with disabilities. One of the documents that I'm sharing right now that I put into the Dropbox link that I shared earlier is all about financial aid for students with intellectual disability.

You know, there are some really great programs. Most of these programs -- and I can't speak to Framingham -- hopefully the folks here on the Zoom can -- that are

considered career CTPs, which are comprehensive transition programs. You are eligible for things like Pell grants and financial aid, and you can fill out the FAFSA form, you know, and get some support in many areas, again I'm in New Hampshire. I don't know as much about Massachusetts.

But in New Hampshire, vocational rehabilitation will help pay as a transition program when students go to college. So I just want to make sure people know that there's also a lot of funding streams that are available for people who go to college. It's really important and I'm sure the people at Framingham want to have a very diverse economic group of students coming to their program as well.

So now, Holly, let me jump to you and ask you that question. Something personal that you might want to share, personal experience or two that relates to some of the themes that we just saw in the film.

>> **Holly Pearson:** Yeah. This is Holly. There's, like, two points that I'm trying to process right now. So I'm trying to keep it kind of an early manner, but I'm also super tired. I think everyone is also super tired at this point of the year. But one thing that really stood out to me or really resonated with me, that when we talk about access, we can't just think about it in a technical aspect.

Such as for me as a Deaf and disabled, just having CART in place or having ASL interpreters in place, that doesn't mean inclusion. And that was something that really resonated with the film was that they really showed that when we're talking about something as simple as college experience, it's not that simple.

It's a multilayered and very complex experience, from the time that you're in the classroom to the time that you're walking to the building to the next building. Those are all part of the experience. And access, when we're just talking about access, like I have ASL interpreters in the classroom, but that doesn't include my experience and my sense of identity development just in the classroom alone.

The other part that just -- I don't know if it resonates, but it's just -- it reminded me of how it was for me in college where I was just a student with a disability. And that was honestly for me, and I don't speak for everyone, but that was incredibly painful because I was only seen as someone with a disability.

And to not have the same space that I talk about my disability and deafness identity and being in spaces where they don't acknowledge such as right now what we're seeing with antiAsian racism or the homophobic mentality that is still very much part of our country.

And to be just seen as an individual with a disability was painful because on the one hand, it was kind of like, I get it. Like, I need accommodations. I need access. I need to play the game to do that. But on the other hand, it taught me very strongly that I needed to coach switch. And it means adjusting identities, adjusting language the way I engage, the way that I dress on an ongoing manner in order to survive, rather

than seeing myself as a complete person where I can thrive as a whole individual. So those were two pieces that really resonated with me with the film.

>> **Dan Habib:** Yeah. Very eloquently said. Thank you, Holly. And I'm curious if you would agree with something I've come to see with my own son, Samuel, who is 21 now and is in community college and uses a wheelchair and a communication device, you know, has a lot of challenges, seizures and a feeding tube, but he's passing college classes.

But what I've found over his educational life is that without him being fully immersed in the school, in the classroom in extracurricular activities, people don't get to know him as a full person. You know, people who really know him know him as Samuel the NASCAR fan and who loves to go seeing and who loves to travel and who is a big Michigan fan because I went to Michigan.

They know his whole personality and all those identities, right? Is that the case with you? Do you feel like once you're fully immersed in a community, whether it's a faculty member or a student, that's when people don't pigeonhole you in terms of just one of your identities.

>> **Holly Pearson:** Yeah, definitely, pigeonhole to say painful. But it's just -- I think it's more for me within to be able to love myself for who I am and to accept myself for who I am. That is, like, the most powerful thing that we can structure in our educational landscape is when we can love ourselves.

>> **Dan Habib:** Beautiful. Thank you for that. That's an incredible sentiment. Very important. April, let me come to you now. There's, you know, a lot of themes in the film, and I know it's been a little while since you've been involved in the Diverse Scholars Program. But is there anything that really personally made you think about some personal experience or that you had after watching the film?

>> **April Yuen:** For me was, like, whether it's visible or invisible disability, whether that's, like, physical, intellectual or just a learning disability, the assumption. I think one of the professors said, like, how can you know me without interacting with me? But you just assume because I have this, I am X, Y, Z or so. And for me, I had the -- well, people assume that I'm pretty -- like, I'm normal, whatever that means.

But on the inside, I, like, have -- I'm weird, I have, like, a learning disability with communication. And I didn't get questioned, but I just got looks, like, why is she -- why does she get accommodation, taking tests at a different location site? But they don't see because they just see, like, I'm pretty decent in school. I'm getting good grades. But they just assume. They don't really know who I am as a person.

So that is something that kind of resonated with me, and just, like, looking back at it now, it's, like, does it really matter whether I have this or not? Like, you should just know me for who I am, and I'm more than glad to express if I want to share that.

>> **Dan Habib:** Yeah. I think that's a great point. I think people - students and adults with hidden disabilities sometimes are seen more skeptically if you want to call it that or people don't understand the accommodations or the supports they might need, you know, when Samuel rolls into a room in his wheelchair, it's obvious he has a disability. But not everybody has that same experience. So- thank you, April, for sharing that. That's a really, really important sentiment.

Let me go to the questions in the chat now, and anybody can weigh in on these answers. But I saw one earlier that was thought was really important there Dora who asked how can we start preparing our middle schoolers for university? So Amy, maybe let me ask you, were you thinking about college back then for both of your kids in middle school, and were there decisions you made or things you did to help them be on that trajectory?

>> **Amy Benincaso:** You know, I just -- it was a weight-and-see, Dan you know? I waited and I saw every year how, you know, the progression was academically and socially. And I honestly let the team members at school help me and guide me with that because I didn't know if that was an opportunity. And -once - they- are the ones who told me, Amy, you know, Adam's a good candidate for the Diverse Scholar Program. And I said okay, good.

You know, for him, he had no doubt. Aamir's going to college so he's going to college. I thought, okay. You know, thank God that there's a program out there because it worked out, you know. Like I said, it doesn't matter to me if he, you know, whether it's a certificate or a degree, that's an accomplishment. You know, I really appreciate, you know, the fact that, you know, there are many, many colleges that are opening their doors because it's so important for everyone to have an opportunity in life.

>> **Dan Habib:** Mmhmm. Yeah. That's a great point. And, you know, a couple notes I'll just make is you may have heard in the film Thomas Newville, the director of the program at Millersville cited recent research that students with intellectual disabilities or autism that go through one of these think college type programs even though they're not degree programs, to be clear, have about an 85% success rate of employment.

>> **Amy Benincaso:** Right.

>> **Dan Habib:** Whereas it's about a 17% success rate for those that don't go through this. Now, that's not the only way to employment but there is that kind of support. And there is in controversy at the national level about the fact that these programs are not degree-seeking programs. And there's a lot of debate right now at the national level where the think college network is saying we need to have a certificate that's consistent or some type of diploma or certificate, something that is seen as a really valuable.

Document that's also universal and that once you achieve it, it's something that can help you get certain jobs. And so I'm not an expert in that, but I just think to be honest,

there are families and others who say, well, why would you spend all this money on college if you don't get a diploma? But if you're going to have a higher rate of employment, if you're going to have more friends, if you're going to build social capital, if you just have the college experience, right, of that soft landing into adulthood and maybe live in a dorm where people are cooking your food, you know?

It's like I heard a woman who -- Beth Myers who directs the Syracuse program said once, young people without disabilities get the soft landing into college. Why shouldn't kids with disabilities also get that soft landing into adulthood, you know? So anyway, there's a lot of reasons, but I also want to be honest. There's also controversy, you know, and discussion about this. Let me just, Adam and Aamir, let me ask you, were you starting to both think in middle school I want to go to college? Or even elementary school? I mean, was that always a goal for you both to go to college?

>> **Aamir Benincaso:** Yes, going to college, we had college stories from my mom and other family members about their college experience, and then there was, like, oh, what do I want to do once I get there? What degree will I pursue? What, like, you know, classes do I have to register for? What am I interested in doing after college? You know, we have to build up on that -- the achievement from, you know, sixth grade up to, like, when you're done like where I am, like senior year, graduating in December. So you need to set your, like, goals. You need to set, like, who you want to be, like, where do you want to go at that level? And then, you know, personally when I went to high school, that's when I said, all right. I'm going to be focusing on psychology and sociology. And then once I graduated high school, then I applied to the classes for the degree in level studies.

So you learn a lot of key important things from the psychology classes and sociology classes that I took relating to people with disabilities and how to interact with them. And that's what I like, you know.

>> **Dan Habib:** Mmhmm.

>> **Aamir Benincaso:** It gave them more of a voice, and that's what I'm looking to create awareness about.

>> **Dan Habib:** Yeah. Great points. Adam, let me ask you, were you thinking about college right from middle school? Was that a goal of yours?

>> **Adam Benincaso:** Yeah, that's what I was thinking about.

>> **Dan Habib:** Mmhmm.

>> **Adam Benincaso:** Thinking about college after middle school.

>> **Dan Habib:** And why? Why was college always so important to you?

>> **Adam Benincaso:** Why? Because I want to see what the classes were like and

what the cafeteria was like.

>> **Dan Habib:** Yeah. And did the cafeteria live up to your expectations or did it disappoint you?

>> **Adam Benincaso:** You mean in middle school?

>> **Dan Habib:** No, in college.

>> **Adam Benincaso:** No, in college? I liked the food there a lot.

>> **Dan Habib:** Okay. All right. Good. I'm glad you were not disappointed. I had mixed experience with the food in college.

>> **Adam Benincaso:** I enjoyed the food, the McCarthy Center.

>> **Dan Habib:** Good.

I'm sure the McCarthy Center cooks will be very excited to hear this, too. Holly, let me ask you, were there things in middle school kind of early on that you feel like were key decisions you or your family made that helped keep you on a path towards college?

>> **Holly Pearson:** This is Holly. So to be honest, I grew up in a situation where because I was deaf, the most I was ever going to be was to be a -- to work at a laundromat or to be a nanny. That's what I was told. And to be honest, I think part of it ties in not with just my deafness but also my gender and my race that was just kind of seen as what I would be able to achieve.

So I have to think a lot for my anger. It may have not been healthy, but at the time, it kept me going. I think looking back and what I would tell my 12yearold self, I mean, right now we have this amazing field of activists and scholars and folks like me that are writing and publishing and putting things on blogs and books, podcasts. And if I had that language, like, disability studies, disability justice, transformative justice framework,

I may have not understood it at 12, but that kind of way of engaging and talking, and I'm not going to unpack it right now. I encourage folks to, and I'm happy to type in the chat some of the things that I mentioned, to go and read because part of it is that a lot of the work is written by us.

Mostly marginalized, disabled body/minds and it's just the insight that we want folks to take and apply.

>> **Dan Habib:** Yeah. Well, please do type in the chat if you have a minute. I'd be interested to see it, and I think my kids would, too. So please do. April, I'm going to share something and ask you a similar question. So for Samuel, in a lot of schools, I think he would have been put on an alternative track away from a regular high school diploma in K12 education.

I think he would have been in some schools seen as doing alternative assessment or

getting, like, a certificate of attendance. Because he has a significant disability. And we always felt strongly in middle school that Samuel could receive a high school diploma and go to college. I'm turning to you because he's in a regular community college program, and he's getting college credit. He hopes to get an associate's degree. He'd like to go to UNH at some point.

He has something called a reasonable accommodations plan. You may be familiar with this, April, I'm not sure. It's the idea that a person with a disability might have some specific challenges where they might need extra time to take a test or they might need a notetaker in the classroom because they can't physically write, like Samuel. And so I think the point I want to make here for people who are attending, these programs like the Diverse Scholars Program and all these think college programs are amazing and they're creating pathways to higher education that never existed. But there's also lots of ways for people with disabilities to go to college without going to one of these programs.

And but having the accommodations that they deserve and have a right to under the Americans with Disabilities Act. So do you feel, April, like you were comfortable selfdisclosing some of the things you talked about earlier, I think you said processing issues, and did you feel like you could get the accommodations and supports in college that you needed in order to successfully, you know, go through your classes?

>> **April Yuen:** So I'm pretty -- for who I am, I'm pretty an open book. I don't mind disclosing what it is. But in middle school, like, I didn't know -- like, I didn't know why I was in the separate math or English class until, like, you do all these testing just to reevaluate yourself. So I didn't understand the whole process into high school where you really focus on the skills that were created and just to achieve it and then hopefully by the end of the senior year, you would be able to accomplish that goal.

And then thankfully I had a skills teacher who encouraged me to, like, look for colleges, not specifically -- I don't know what's the term, but, like, has that well supported but still you're able to be free, and Framingham State was on the list. And it's pretty much a small school. It's pretty local where I live.

And she helped me prepare, like, a nice -- like, a packet of this is my IEP information. This is what I need in college. And then when I get there, I can just either explain or just kind of give that document to the folks at CASA.

>> **Dan Habib:** Right.

>> **April Yuen:** And even if I didn't need it, even if you don't need your accommodations, it's just good to, like, tell someone or just present that. And if you ever need it, you're more than welcome to use it. You know, it's better to have it than not -- is it better to have it or not use it? Some saying like that. But you know it's there so you don't have to go through that process of, like, explaining or just doing all of that.



>> **Dan Habib:** Yeah. That's a really, really great point. A bunch of great points you made. You know, for those that aren't familiar with something like a reasonable accommodations plan, as you were saying, April, what Samuel's been encouraged to do and perhaps you were is send it in advance to a professor before you take the class. And then that professor, kind of like an IEP, is supposed to read it and actually provide those accommodations.

Now, does every professor do that perfectly? Probably not. But at least you've made the point, and you've got some legal rights, you know, to pursue that. But I think that most professors Samuel's encountered in community college, hopefully the same for you all, they really do pay attention to this. And they want you to be successful. Professors want you to be successful in the classes, I hope. I don't think they'd be in the profession otherwise.

We are just about out of time. So I just want to ask, is there anything burning from the panel that you haven't shared that you really want to say before I turn it back over to Ashley for maybe a few closing comments and James if they'd like? Anything? You guys have been amazing. We've said a lot. But is there anything that we've missed? I'm seeing nobody jumping up, so I think we're good.

Ashley, I'm going to -- love to have you close. You've been doing a great job, Ashley, of answering questions in the chat. But I wonder, there were a couple of key questions that you may just want to speak out loud, particularly I thought around, you know, the Diverse Scholars Program. There was a lot of questions coming in about that. Is there anything you want to make sure people leave here tonight knowing about diverse scholars or anything else that came up?

>> **Ashley:** Yeah, I would say an overarching themes in the chat in particular is just, you know, look at the college website for sure. Diverse Scholars Program is different. All the programs have different aspects to them. They have different course offerings, different internship opportunities, location, Bridgewater State has a residence hall that they have, Res Life for students to live on campus as well. So I would just encourage everyone to check out those resources.

If you're a freshman in high school, you know, as Amy mentioned, she spoke very - this- is just great advice. Just, you know, trust the transition program team for sure and also just explore your student's interests and listen to them and see where would they be a good applicant or a best fit. Our program does not have residence halls. I know that was a question.

And then just going back to what you said, Dan, about disability and accessibility, reasonable accommodations in college. Every college should have an office. So anyone who's a parent on here or an incoming college student who may have an IEP 504 plan or just even a psychiatric disability where they think that they could get some reasonable accommodations, just always look for that office. Look at the tutoring center. So, yeah, that's kind of everything.

>> **Dan Habib:** Great. Well, I like to be respectful of people's time and it's 8:31. I don't know, James, if you had anything you wanted to comment on. I just put in the chat all my contact information if anyone would like to get in touch or follow social media. We have some big new film projects coming out pretty soon. So if you follow us on any social media, you'll learn about those in the next few weeks.

A whole new project I'm about to launch or get ready to launch. And also I just want to thank the panel. You guys were awesome tonight. Just absolutely fantastic. You added so many great perspectives, and we all really appreciate your time and life experiences that you shared tonight.

>> **James:** Thank you, Dan, so much and to all the panelists. It was just wonderful conversation, as one of the professors here got me thinking a lot about my teaching and how I approach inclusion, and it's wonderful to hear from, you know, our students, alumni, staff, faculty and parents.

So this will be - this was recorded, so this will be shared out in an email to everyone who registered as well and posted to the Chris Walsh Center website. The Chris Walsh Center has some other resources available. We are going to be offering parent and caregiver support groups, and we have drop--in- hours right now where parents and caregivers in the community can log on make an appointment, or just drop in and speak with us about your child's needs.

So, I want to make sure you know about that. Let's see. We would love to take a quick screenshot of the panel here, everyone, if that's okay. Before we start to log off. So, yeah. Get on camera. Good. Get everyone in there, Mom.

>> **Dan Habib:** As you're doing that, James, if I can talk and smile at the same time. If people do want to save the chat, bottom right, there's three dots, and I think everyone can just hit save chat. And if you want to keep everything that was in there, please save, go ahead and do that. All right. Now you can take the shot.

>> **James:** Okay. Three, two, one. Great. I think I got that. Let's see. And there's a question, can links to those resources be put on the movies website? We can put them on our website.

>> **Dan Habib:** Yeah, put them on your website. I don't have control of that website. That's at Millersville. But they're all in the chat. And if you could put them on your website, that would be great.

>> **James:** They will be. Ellen and I have been privately messaging tonight saying we're going to put those on our Chris Walsh Center website. We'll put them with the film link but also in our transition section. We're starting to build that out.

>> **Dan Habib:** Great.

>> **James:** So thank you for that. I don't suppose, Dan, you can't tell us about your

new film project, can you?

>> **Dan Habib:** No, we've got to have another gig for that one. It would be too hard to tell in two minutes. If people do any of my social media, they'll learn about it. We should have another event and do a little 15minute preview of it we can share.

>> **James:** That's very exciting to share. We'll definitely have you back.

>> **Dan Habib:** One thing, it's codirected with Samuel. That's the one piece of information I'll tell you.

>> **James:** That's great.

>> **Dan Habib:** Listen, I want to wish everyone good health and rest and enjoy the spring, most of all. So there's light at the end of the tunnel, I think, for all of us. I hope we're all feeling that.

>> **James:** Indeed. Hope is on the horizon. Thank you, Dan. Thank you, everyone, for being part of this event. Good night.

>> **Dan Habib:** Great. Thank you. Enjoyed it so much.