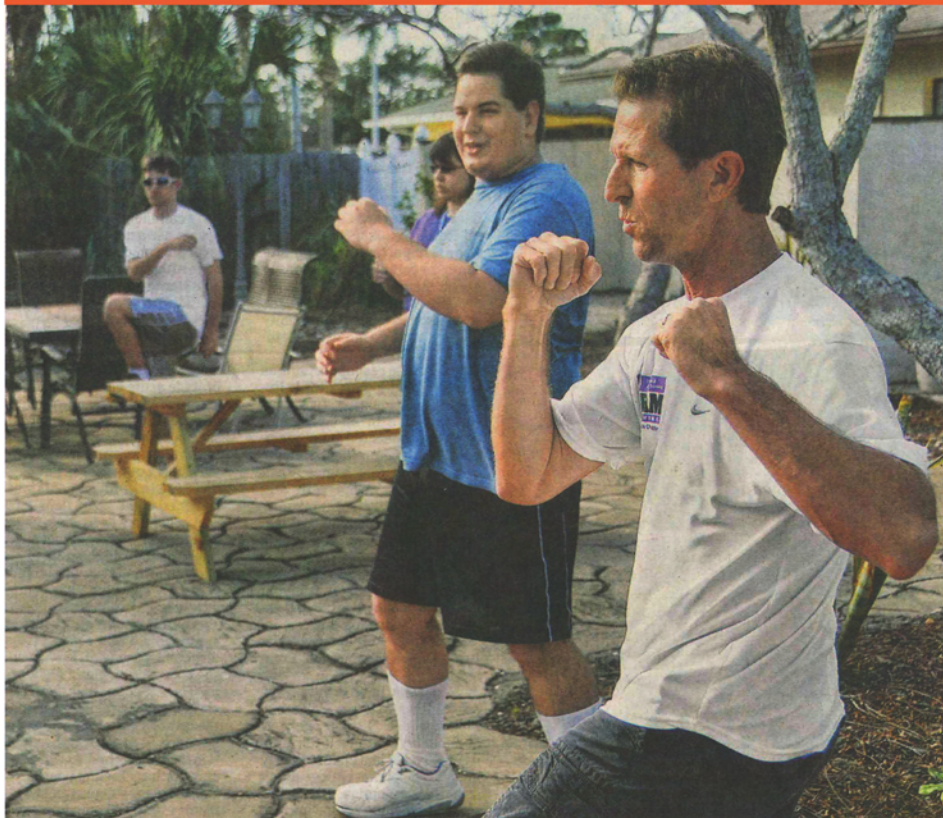


# FLORIDA TODAY

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75 CENTS



Lance Haskins, wellness coordinator, leads a class involving physical fitness and martial arts in the College Internship Program commons area in Melbourne. MALCOLM DENEMARK/FLORIDA TODAY



Jennifer Kolarik, career coordinator, helps Dodge Meadows, a student in the program, fill out a summer internship application for NASA.

MALCOLM DENEMARK/FLORIDA TODAY

## Autistic adults get transition assistance

Melbourne program eases challenges into college, career, life

By Maria Sonnenberg  
For FLORIDA TODAY

Zachary Smuckler admits that in high school, he was the “weird guy” who didn’t fit in with any group.

When he graduated from high school, Smuckler, who has Asperger’s syndrome, tried a semester at Valencia Community College, where things went from bad to worse for him.

“I had a lot of trouble maintaining focus and motivation,” Smuckler said.

Before their son was diagnosed with Asperger’s, Smuckler’s parents tried to put him in sink-or-swim situations that even included time in an Israeli kibbutz, just so he could shake off his problems. Nothing worked until the Winter Park resident enrolled in the College Internship Program in Melbourne.

Now Smuckler is student body president for the 15-student program and carries a full class load at Brevard Community College. He volunteers with Project Response and hopes to become a psychologist or mental health counselor.

Transitioning from adolescence into adulthood can be tough for everyone, but particularly hard for young people with learning differences.

Parents worry their children may never finish college, find a job and maintain relationships. Their worries are well-grounded, because 35 percent of students with learning disabilities such as Asperger’s drop out of high school, and fewer than 2 percent of those who do manage to graduate go on to a four-year college.

### FOR MORE INFO

The College Internship Program accepts students from across the United States at its campus in Brevard, as well as locations in Massachusetts, Indiana and California. For information on the Brevard campus, call 321-259-1900 or visit [CollegeInternshipProgram.com](http://CollegeInternshipProgram.com).

“The struggle for independence can be extremely difficult for young adults with learning differences,” said College Internship Program founder Dr. Michael McManmon, who was diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome in his early 50s.

“Instead of transitioning from dependence to independence, many parents see their children withdraw. Feelings of anxiety, depression and a sense of inadequacy that have always been there intensify.”

# Autism

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## Few programs exist

While many services exist for autistic children, options thin out as the child ages. The College Internship Program is one of the few intensive postsecondary academic and independent living experiences for young adults with Asperger's, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and learning differences.

Started in Lee, Mass., in 1984, the program maintains six campuses in New York, California, Massachusetts, Indiana, plus the Melbourne facility, the only one in Florida, which began in 2004.

Dr. Stephen Shore, author of "Understanding Autism for Dummies," calls the program "one of the most comprehensive in the world for empowering people with high-functioning autism and Asperger's syndrome to achieve success in higher education, employment and life in general."

The year-round College Internship Program takes an intensive approach at helping young adults master the life skills they will need to succeed in college and career. The goal isn't just academic success, but also developing the ability to cope well with life's many demands.

"The main goal is for them to become independent and self-supporting," said CIP head student adviser Sharona Sommer.

"It's not a matter of their being able to do everything on their own, but of being able to access what they need."

The program focuses on helping students hone their executive functioning, the mental process that governs a person's ability to manage time, make plans and complete tasks.

"It's the ability to organize the world," admissions director

Joan Williamson said. "You can do a wonderful research paper, but if you are unable to hand it in on time, it's not going to help you."

Dodge Meadows, for example, had attempted college at Auburn University in Alabama, but like many students with Asperger's, did poorly because he just



Lance Haskins leads a class involving physical fitness and martial arts. In the background is Dodge Meadows. MALCOLM DENEMARK/FLORIDA TODAY

couldn't get organized enough to cope with college life.

"In the past, I could only focus on one aspect of my life," said Meadows, from Montgomery, Ala.

In the structured program at CIP, Meadows thrived. He now plans to transition back to Au-

burn. CIP is working with him to secure an internship at NASA, because Meadows wants to work as an aerospace engineer.

## Life challenges

Advisers help students with budgeting, weekly goal setting, and communication with family

## SUPPORT GROUP

The Autism Caregivers Connect support group meets monthly and offers family gatherings for caregivers and children. The next meeting is at 7 p.m. March 9 at Go Have Fun inside the Merritt Square Mall. The next family get-together is at 1 p.m. Saturday at River Lanes in Titusville. For more information, visit ACCBrevard.org.

and friends.

"Many times, the students will struggle because they do not understand nonverbal language," career coordinator Jennifer Kolarik said. "They need to recognize facial expressions."

Internships at facilities such as Wuesthoff Health System, Baer Air, Brevard County Natural Resources and Brevard Zoo also are important in helping students eventually transition to life on their own.

CIP's campus is across the street from Brevard Community College, where a majority of students attend class.

To provide real opportunities to interact with others while living independently, first-year students live in an apartment complex connected by a courtyard, while the older students share one of five homes. Residential staff works with students on executive functioning tasks that may include cooking, grocery shopping and doing laundry.

CIP student Ross Morgan, who has Asperger's, is studying for an associate's degree in business administration and has interned at the Melbourne-Palm Bay Area Chamber of Commerce.

"I did not have a very good school life," said the Columbia, Md., resident. "I spent one year at home trying to look for a job with no luck. I had done so poorly in high school that college didn't seem like an option. I had zero confidence when I came into the program, and I was very reclusive."

A poster boy for CIP, Morgan now has a 4.0 average at BCC.

"I've gotten out of my comfort zone," he said. "I was apparently a very smart person and did not know it."



Williamson