



Stephen Blaisdell '11, special education teacher at Crossroads School in Natick, is among the first group of ABA students. Here he works with a student at Crossroads.

New graduate program to serve those with autism

PHOTO: DAN VAILLANCOURT

Master's program trains students to become applied behavior analysts.

BY TROY WATKINS

The numbers are staggering. One in 68 school-aged American children have autism, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In 2000, the prevalence was estimated at 1 in 150.

The steady increase in diagnoses has created a rising need for services, according to Karen Lionello-DeNolf, Ph.D., director of Assumption's Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) program, which offers a Master of Arts degree and a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study. "The increase in the diagnosis of autism makes people more aware of autism and its impact on people," she said. "It's impacting schools more than it used to in addition to impacting service providers who assist those who have more severe cases of autism. As that's happened, the need for services has grown."

People diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, a neurodevelopmental disorder, have difficulty in the areas of verbal and nonverbal communication, social interaction, and repetitive behaviors. The severity of the symptoms in these three areas can vary widely across individuals and extend past childhood and adolescence into adulthood, thus having a strong impact on the individual's social relationships and ability to live independently.

Responding to a growing need

“There is an acute need for services in central and western Massachusetts, as a majority of behavior analysts are concentrated in eastern Massachusetts,” Lionello-DeNolf said. “Agencies have looked to train college students as behavior therapists.” Behavior therapists provide interventions based on ABA, which are widely considered to be among the most effective and evidence-based treatments for autism.

“Assumption faculty members in the psychology, education, and human services and rehabilitation studies departments recognized the growing need in the Worcester community for individuals trained to provide behavioral services based on student internship placements and inquiries from local organizations looking for assistance,” said Lionello-DeNolf. This encouraged the College to research, plan and create an ABA program, one that draws students from the three majors into a field congruent with the College’s mission to form graduates known for compassionate service and complements its other graduate programs related to the helping professions.



Graduate student Ashley Perry with Trisha Rodricks O’Connell ’98, G’01, assistant director of clinical services at Seven Hills Community Services.

Fascinating work

Many of the students in the new ABA program already have experience providing behavioral services. They are pursuing a graduate degree to advance their careers while expanding their abilities to serve clients with autism and their families. A special education teacher at Crossroads School in Natick, **Stephen Blaisdell ’11** is among the College’s first group of ABA students. Blaisdell earned a degree in psychology from Assumption and has worked with children with autism for four years. Crossroads is a private day school that provides individualized programs based on ABA principles.

“This organization exemplifies the compassion and understanding that it takes to work in this field, and it has provided me with an excellent platform to grow and develop as a behavior analyst,” he said.

He credits his undergraduate experiences at the College with the mindset he relies upon daily. “Assumption taught me to think critically about everyday problems,” he said. “I learned valuable skills that allowed me to adapt more easily to changing contingencies in the environment.” For these reasons, he chose to return to Assumption for his graduate degree. “Through one semester in the ABA program I feel that this is the type of well-thought out coursework that develops creative thought as it pertains to scientific material ... something I believe will truly benefit me in the future.”

The ABA program

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Graduates meet eligibility requirements to take the Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) Exam.

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-Stephen Blaisdell '11, Master of Arts in Applied Behavior Analysis student

ABA students—such as Ashley Perry, a shared living case manager with Seven Hills—are excited about what they hope to learn through the program. "I hope to gain the proper skills to go into the field and work with young children or adults to help reduce problem behaviors for struggling families," said Perry.

Cynthia Rielley, an ABA student and an instructional assistant in CMSEC's THRIVE program, has a similar goal. "I want to play a more active role in developing ways to help my clients achieve the most independent and fulfilling life possible," said Rielley. "I see first-hand how much ABA can help individuals live higher quality lives."



Program director Karen Lionello-DeNolf, Ph.D.



ABA student Ashley Perry meeting with a client.

significance," Blaisdell said. "The science of behavior applies to all living organisms and as a result, this degree does not limit a person to a specific domain, but instead prepares them to work in any setting they choose."

Lionello-DeNolf echoes the value and opportunities an ABA degree from Assumption will afford each student. "The program's comprehensive education strives to illustrate how behavioral principles can be applied to improve people's lives across many areas, including autism treatment. In addition, the program includes a practicum experience to provide students with quality training and fieldwork experience," she explained.

Assumption's ABA course sequence and practicum courses meet the Behavior Analyst Certification Board's requirements for eligibility to take the Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) Examination*.

This credential is internationally recognized and essential for individuals who wish to provide behavioral services in clinical settings. Both the master's and CAGS programs also meet requirements for students to apply for licensure as an applied behavior analyst in Massachusetts.

Students have the opportunity to gain experience in the field through the College's affiliations with Seven Hills Foundation and the Central Massachusetts Special Education Collaborative (CMSEC), among other organizations. "This partnership will provide students a unique field-work placement in a large human service organization working with adults across a number of community settings," said **Trisha Rodricks O'Connell '98, G'01**, a BCBA and assistant director of clinical services at Seven Hills Community Services, an affiliate of its Foundation.

Blaisdell is intrigued by how the ABA program will help him advance toward his career aspirations. "I hope to strengthen my understanding of how the science affects children and young adults with autism," he said. "Understanding the theories and practices is important to realizing how they can be applied, and that is what you get from this program."

"By the end of the program I want to develop behavior programs based on scientific principles and feel confident that the work I am doing is individualized and targets the behavior I want to change. I also would like to become a BCBA, and I know this program will prepare me well."

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