

# IMPACT Innovation

## IMPACT at UC

At the library, Sarah requests a book by showing the librarian choices from categories on the laminated card she made with help from graduate student McKenzie. At the Rec Center, Blake gets a mat and lays on the floor to work on some bridges and clam shells with encouragement from Jacob, a student worker majoring in physical therapy. In the Biolab, Andrew categorizes archived plant specimens by taking photos and entering data under the supervision of the Project Administrator and Collections Manager of the [Margaret H. Fulford Herbarium](#). At Adrian Durbin Florist, Haley works to help clean the store, then creates her own flower arrangement with guidance from the florists there.



*Andrew working at the Biolab*



*Haley working at the florist*

These are everyday activities at the University of Cincinnati (UC), but Sarah, Blake, Andrew and Haley are not students. They are associates, adults who have finished high school and now attend IMPACT Innovation, a different kind of adult day program embedded on UC's main campus, an area encompassing 137 acres just north of downtown Cincinnati.

IMPACT Innovation is one of the [Advancement and Transition Services \(ATS\)](#) offered by UC to high school students and adults with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD). As the name implies, IMPACT Innovation is something new, something...innovative. It's more than a day program, or a service, or a community employment opportunity. This is a new approach to providing adults whose skills have been overshadowed by their challenges, the supports, the environment and the time they need to become successfully and meaningfully engaged in their world. These adults are not matriculated UC students, but their status as associates, with UC ID cards, gives them access to all corners of the campus, recognizing them as included members of the university community.

There are a variety of Adult Day Services available in Ohio, but, of more than 700 programs, IMPACT Innovation is the only one on a large, urban university campus. It is inclusive by its very setting. In addition, from its inception in 2015, IMPACT was designed for adults with the most significant communication, behavior and sensory support needs because the needs of these adults were not being met by existing programs.

Many people with IDD have communication challenges. These challenges cover a continuum of characteristics and support needs, and many day programs can provide their participants with the assistance they need to effectively communicate. For those with

the most significant support needs, however, it is often the use of language itself to formulate and express thoughts that is the barrier. Supporting these individuals requires an in-depth understanding of language and all forms of communication, verbal and non-verbal. IMPACT offers this level of expertise. In addition to its own faculty and staff, IMPACT has a partnership with the [Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders \(CSD\)](#) in UC's College of Allied Health Sciences. An on-site speech-language pathologist (SLP) mentors CSD graduate students in developing individualized communication plans. Consistency in the implementation of these plans across all direct support staff has long been a priority and research interest of special education faculty involved with IMPACT. The idea is straightforward, but critical for success - build the best plan, then make sure everyone uses it as it was intended.



*Ashish works on his communication skills with a student worker*

One of the newest communication initiatives at IMPACT is "texting groups" run by the SLP and graduate students. The group helps associates master this practical skill by texting photos to other associates, family and friends, but this initiative takes it to the next level, requiring them to identify and text how the pictures make them feel. The abstract nature of emotions can be a real challenge to those who struggle with language, but iPads with the app TouchChat® are always at hand for associates to find words to express themselves with the help of the group. It is part of the culture of IMPACT for staff to work consciously every day to recognize and enhance any and all communication efforts an associate demonstrates. Breakthroughs can come at any time, and families have reported being pleasantly surprised by an associate's new, unexpected communication skill.

While many programs can accommodate some communication challenges, there are very few day programs that welcome adults with significant behavior support needs. As the mother of one IMPACT associate said of her son who was asked to leave two previous adult day programs, "Behavior will get you thrown out every time."

For people with the most significant behavior support needs, anxiety or stress coupled with environmental triggers can set off a chain reaction to a "meltdown" - a complete loss of self-regulatory abilities that can result in injury to themselves or others, or destruction of property. Of importance, though, is that these behaviors are not inevitable, and they don't occur in isolation. After all, it is a truism that, "Behavior is communication." The behaviors may not be totally preventable, but with the patience and expertise to provide the right kinds of support, behaviors that cause problems can be minimized, and the negative effects mitigated. For years, IMPACT faculty have implemented, researched and taught evidenced-based best practices to recognize and address contributing factors BEFORE detrimental behaviors occur, and to respond appropriately if they do. The ability of IMPACT staff to adequately meet behavior support needs has put families at ease. Parents do not need to be concerned that they might get called at any moment and asked to take their son or daughter home because of a behavior. For many IMPACT families, this is a remarkable and appreciated difference from other programs.

Sensory needs can be hard to identify, but they can totally prevent a person from pursuing their interests. People who are over-responsive to sensory stimuli can find the normal environment of conversations around them, fluorescent lights flickering or clothes chafing to be completely intolerable, potentially triggering a behavioral response. Those who are under-responsive may appear disconnected or disinterested. They need extra sensory input to get their brains in gear so they can engage with what's happening around them. As with communication and behavior support needs, meeting sensory needs requires the expertise to recognize them and the knowledge of how best to support them.

IMPACT Innovation was created by people from a variety of disciplines with the specialized expertise and knowledge to meet these intense communication, behavior and sensory support needs in the context of Adult Day Services. IMPACT is housed in the School of Education in the [College of Education, Criminal Justice and Human Services](#) and Information Technology (CECH). In this academic environment the services provided are evidenced-based and constantly reevaluated to provide each associate with a plan for success based on their individual skills and challenges.



*Illustrated step-by-step instructions help Bayley follow a recipe independently*

The IMPACT administration, faculty and staff recognize that accommodations and supports are not age specific. Adults benefit from them too. If an associate is having success with specific accommodations or supports in place, the success is most likely because of the supports, not an indication that supports are no longer needed. IMPACT staff work hard to ensure that course content and planned activities are age appropriate, while maintaining the evidenced-based supports and accommodations that the associates need for continued growth and success. This foundation in understanding development, communication, behavior and sensory processing, and the vast array of opportunities for associates is what makes IMPACT so different and so special.

## **IMPACT Day-to-Day**

Associates have a home base in Teachers' College, but this area is truly just a starting point to check schedules and plan the day, and to retreat to if things get overwhelming. This small home base where each associate has their own cubicle is essential for the sense of security that allows trust to build for these experiential learners. They depend on the staff to help them make sense of novel encounters as they venture out into campus activities or pre-employment opportunities. That trust is a critical factor in reducing anxiety.

Associates are constantly coming and going from this home base, pursuing individual interests or engaging in life-long learning. They create art with the non-profit [Art with Intention](#). They are immersed in theatre with the [Hunter Heartbeat Program](#) brought to



*Associates are intent on creating their individual art with Art with Intention*

them by members of [Ensemble Theatre Cincinnati](#). They learn to cook with [New Leaf Kitchen](#). They learn healthy habits with Healthy Bearcats and have individualized fitness plans through a collaboration with [Big Blue Canopy](#).



*Kelly participates in Hunter Heartbeat with Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati*



*Steve works on his personal fitness goals at the Rec Center*

From their office, which is Command Central for the home base in Teachers' College, Director Lee Ann Emmons and Program Coordinator JoAnn Ramsey keep an experienced watch over it all. Between them they have 45 years of experience supporting adults with IDD, and they are extremely adept at avoiding potentially volatile situations and engineering more mutually supportive ones for the associates, whom they know very well.

On this day, Emma wants to go swimming, but she and the only other associate scheduled to go to the pool during her leisure time haven't been getting along this week. He is having some trouble with self-regulation today, and it could become a problem if they have a disagreement. With the skill of Rubik's® Cube masters, Lee Ann and JoAnn rearrange time slots, and rewrite the schedules. Everyone who wants to swim is going to the pool, but the likely conflict and potential behaviors have been avoided. The next step is to be sure to communicate the changes to every affected associate to give them time to prepare for the day. Situations like this occur multiple times every day. The constant schedule reviews and adjustments are time and labor intensive, but they are a large part of what makes IMPACT run smoothly, and what makes associates look forward to coming every day. Not all crises can be avoided, but an unavoidable crisis is more manageable if there are fewer crises overall.

The special qualities that Lee Ann and JoAnn bring to the program aren't easily measured and will never appear in a program compliance review, but their dedication, patience, flexibility and overall competence have a calming and motivating effect on both associates, and staff, who are, for the most part, student workers.

In this university setting, the student workers are the backbone of the direct support staff. The program couldn't exist without them. Many are earning degrees in fields such as special education, psychology or speech/language pathology, and some receive course credit for their involvement. They have a vested interest in understanding the associates' communication, behavior and sensory challenges and learning all they can from the faculty and staff who mentor them in this work. The students' time working as support staff is limited to their time at the university, but with the notoriously high turn-



*Associates and student workers meet the UC Bearcat on campus*

over rate among Direct Support Professionals, getting several good years from very motivated workers is a win for everyone. A previous IMPACT director, now retired, once commented, "You can't buy that kind of enthusiasm for any price."

In general, adult day programs for people with IDD are under-funded and understaffed. They struggle to meet the needs of people across the spectrum of IDD. They don't have the staffing or the expertise to devote to those with the most significant support needs, so these individuals just get further marginalized. Staffing IMPACT with mentored, motivated students also helps to make this intensive, evidenced-based program financially viable.

IMPACT associates clearly benefit from the direct service provided by the program, but there is also a ripple effect of awareness and understanding that emanates from IMPACT because it lives within a UC community of more than 47,000 students.

The 75 student workers hired over the course of a year at IMPACT learn first-hand from experienced mentors how to navigate the most challenging situations involving behavior, communication and sensory processing needs. They get to observe for themselves what success looks like for someone when they can demonstrate their skills because their significant support needs have been appropriately met. For those student workers going into related fields, these lessons and experiences will be invaluable as they advance in their careers. For IMPACT student workers in fields not related to IDD, whether they are majoring in engineering or economics, or finance, they will remember the lived experience of watching hidden skills become apparent with adequate support, and they will be able to see the people around them with IDD as more than just their challenges.

And, as happens on any college campus, solid friendships form that have outlasted the time on campus. Associate Matt and a former student worker enjoy spending time together every summer at King's Island. Ali likes to go to Skyline every week with another. Dustin enjoys seeing many former student workers socially for lunch or dinner, or a Reds game, and has attended weddings for three of them.

Students now attending UC have grown up in a time where they may well have had classmates in school with significant support needs. That is often lost when moving on to a college setting. IMPACT provides all students, from all disciplines, with the opportunity to get to know people with IDD who have been too often marginalized because their support needs were seen as too high. With 66 separate buildings, UC's main campus functions like a small city, and associates permeate almost every aspect of campus life. Sustained interactions at the Rec Center, the food court, the library, football games, and all the other places students go, give those students not directly involved with IMPACT the opportunity to get to actually know associates as individual people.

## IMPACT beginnings

How did IMPACT Innovation come to be? It was the timely intersection of an unmet need, the means to meet that need and the champions determined to see that need met. The story begins with the vision of David and Diana O'Brien, parents of triplets with autism. Diana founded the non-profit [IMPACT Autism](#) in 2006, building on the immensely successful fundraising efforts of her family's Mayfield Golf Classic that started raising funds for autism in 1999. At first, the mission of IMPACT Autism was to fund existing efforts to improve the lives of families living with autism in the Greater Cincinnati region. As the triplets, Andrew, Kelly and Megan grew into adulthood, it became apparent to the O'Briens that what they would need when the triplets left the



*Diana O'Brien describing IMPACT Innovation at the 2020 Mayfield Golf Classic*

education system was simply not available. In the spring of 2009, the Board of IMPACT Autism voted to extend the charter of the organization to include a focus on adults with autism. A goal was added to enhance the infrastructure available to adults with autism by providing evidence-based solutions that allow each adult to reach their potential. Diana envisioned a village wherein young adults like her children could live, continue to grow and learn, work at something useful and pursue enjoyable leisure activities.

IMPACT Autism explored options and opened discussions with potential partners but they could not find the right foundation to begin to build that vision into reality. Then, in 2013, Dr. Christi Carnahan joined the IMPACT Autism Board. Dr. Carnahan was the Director of the Transition and Access Program (TAP) at UC, a four-year, non-degree program designed to provide students with IDD an authentic college experience. She had over a decade of experience teaching and researching how to support children and adults with IDD, especially those with the most significant communication, behavior and sensory support needs.

UC was already at the forefront of providing inclusive on-campus experiences with TAP and Project Launch, a partnership between UC Special Education and a local school district since 2007 to provide an inclusive experience for transition-age students with IDD

on UC's main campus. Both TAP and Project Launch were housed within the School of Education in CECH with the full endorsement and support of CECH leadership, including Dean Larry Johnson.

Dr. Carnahan wanted to extend those opportunities to adults with the most significant support needs. She shared this vision with the IMPACT Autism Board, highlighting the many components of Diana O'Brien's Village that already existed on a college campus, places to learn, places to work, places to eat with friends, and places for recreation. The concept of IMPACT Innovation was born in the shared vision of champions at IMPACT Autism and UC's School of Education. The school had the infrastructure and the institutional support to build a program. IMPACT Autism had the funds it would need to get started.



*Dr. Christi Carnahan  
with associate Sam*

The first step was to identify existing programs to serve as models, so, in 2014, Kate Doyle, a graduate assistant in Special Education traveled to programs around the country, observing and interviewing staff and directors to find the best application of evidenced-based practices for this population. She found many programs with components of the IMPACT Innovation vision, but no one program encompassed the full vision of supporting people with the most significant communication, behavior and sensory support needs in an inclusive environment within a sustainable structure.

Over the next year, the iterative process of building IMPACT Innovation with the start-up funds from IMPACT Autism began. It would be an adult day program, fundable by Ohio Medicaid dollars through Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities waivers. It would be embedded on the main campus of UC. It would be staffed by experienced Direct Support Professionals, UC faculty with expertise in pertinent fields and student workers. It would be sustained by the Medicaid dollars, research and service grants, in-kind support from the university, and philanthropy, with a business model that emphasized decreasing reliance on fund-raising for daily operating costs.

During this time, UC further demonstrated its leadership in the field of IDD by consolidating its programs in the School of Education into Advancement and Transition Services (ATS) under the leadership of Dr. Carnahan. These included Project Launch, now expanded to multiple school districts and renamed Collaboration for Employment and Education Synergy (CEES), TAP, and IMPACT Innovation.

On October 1, 2015, the first IMPACT Innovation associate arrived on campus. Shannon was 22 years old and had been unsuccessful in two well established adult programs because the supports that had become an integral part of her success throughout her school years were gone. At IMPACT, those evidenced-based supports such as written daily schedules, carrying white boards for impromptu visual cues, written narratives for predicting events and preparing for unknowns, and visual prompts for self-regulation, were fixed as a standard part of every day. The bar was set high. She was challenged in ways she never had been to learn more and do more,

but she was supported in these efforts by people whose careers were devoted to understanding how best to provide these supports. With their help she learned to ride the UC shuttle to volunteer at the Ronald McDonald house, to make [Brewhaus Dog Bones](#) in unused kitchen space on campus, to work at the Teachers' Cafe with guidance from [Aramark](#) employees working there, to post to her own facebook page, and to explore her special interest, singing, with a graduate student in the renowned [College Conservatory of Music](#).



*IMPACT's first associate Shannon exploring campus in fall 2015*

Word spread fast. Requests for application information started coming from school districts, county boards of DD services, and families. One CSD student called his mother to get his sister enrolled because, "This was something special." The O'Brien triplets started attending, and soon IMPACT Innovation grew, from a fledgling program to an established part of the university under the ATS umbrella. The program quickly reached capacity and they had to start a wait list for potential associates.

When the campus shut down for the COVID-19 pandemic on March 14, 2020, the IMPACT staff rallied to have on-line options in less than a week, and the IMPACT associates were the first group to return to campus. The sensory and behavior challenges of wearing masks were met head on by the faculty and staff, and associates were welcomed back on June 29, 2020 by the Program Director at CECH, trusting them to adhere to all the required protocols.

IMPACT Innovation isn't just a day program that uses space on the UC campus. The university cares about what happens at IMPACT. There is an advisory group for ATS comprising representatives from administration, business, student affairs, other colleges, and campus police. When it became known that transportation was a barrier for some IMPACT associates, it was this university-level panel that arrived at a solution. The vans used by the university "Night Ride" service that shuttled students who needed rides on campus at night sat idle during the day. UC made those vans available to IMPACT, allowing them to save money and provide a desperately needed service to the associates.

All around UC's campus are banners reminding faculty, students and visitors alike that, "Next lives here." IMPACT Innovation is next. It should be a model for the future. The collaborations across all of UC's campuses, involving the College of Medicine, College of Allied Health Sciences, School of Social Work, even the College of Design, Architecture, Art and Planning (DAAP), and more, have created crosstalk among multiple disciplines, providing more comprehensive *service* opportunities to associates, more *learning* opportunities for UC students and more *research* opportunities with far reaching potential benefits to all adults with IDD. IMPACT Innovation is what can happen when a forward-thinking university connects with active community fundraisers and champions who want to make a difference for adults with IDD with the most significant communication, behavior and sensory support needs. For Sarah, Blake, Andrew, Haley, and all the IMPACT associates, next is looking pretty good.