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To see the potential of students with intellectual disabilities, one need look no further than Eddie Lewis.

When he was in ninth grade, Eddie shared his dream of attending college with his family. Reluctantly, his mother said that because of his disabilities college was not an option. Eddie has autism as well as an intellectual disability. In high school, he didn't converse often or engage in much eye contact.

Eddie's mom changed her mind when she heard about Academic & Career Exploration: Individualized Techniques (ACE IT) in College at Virginia Commonwealth University. ACE IT is an initiative that supports students with intellectual disabilities to attend college. After learning the details of the program, Eddie's mother told him to "reach for the sky" and not let others squash his dreams!

In high school, Eddie followed a track for students pursuing a special diploma with core academic classes provided in a self-contained classroom. His elective classes focused on career readiness and his passion for art.

Eddie participated in school-based and community-based work experiences, and his favorite internship experience was working with cars at a local auto repair shop called Grease Monkey.

Eddie recently landed a job with Amazon as a fulfillment center specialist, earning \$11.50 an hour, working 40 hours per week, and receiving health insurance benefits. Soon he will no longer need Social Security benefits due to his full-time job.

His teachers praised his strong work ethic, and he exited high school in May 2011 with a special diploma.

Eddie came to ACE IT in College with a 4th-grade reading level and a 3rd-grade level in math. Linked to adult services, such as vocational rehabilitation, the Community Services Board, and the Social Security Administration, he brought a strong team

to support his quest for college and beyond.

Eddie was accepted as a non-degree-seeking student for the Fall 2011 semester at VCU. He was one of the first two students enrolled at VCU via ACE IT in College.

At the start of his first semester, Eddie was matched with two other VCU students who would act as his education

coaches. With their help, he easily learned to navigate the campus, use the VCU email system, and access Blackboard, an online course management system.

Eddie accomplished all this during the first week of classes. This strong beginning set the stage for the remainder of his 30-month program.

Eddie participated in two classes his first semester: Introduction to the University and Strength, Endurance & Flexibility Training. Determined to do well, Eddie earned a one-credit A in Introduction to University and audited Strength, Endurance and Flexibility, receiving excellent grades on assignments. Driven by his love of sports, Eddie applied, interviewed, and was hired as a VCU student worker at the Cary Street Gym, getting his foot in the door in the laundry department.

Second semester became a juggling act with two courses--Reading Film and Introduction to Drawing--as well as an eight-hour work shift at the gym each week. Eddie rose to the occasion, completing a self-portrait and earning a two-credit A in his drawing class. Even though he succeeded in meeting the standards for this course in his area of career interest, Eddie shared that he never wanted to take a drawing class again!



Eddie continued to excel in his coursework as well as his campus job. In fact, his only need for support this semester was reminders not to clock in early for his work shifts! By mid-semester he had advocated for a promotion to the facilities maintenance department, where he helped maintain and repair gymnasium equipment.

Once Eddie became comfortable with the maintenance crew, he began to socialize (usually in one-word or two-word comments). His peers would joke with him about the Dallas Cowboys and about how he was always on time. Eddie continued to work in this position until graduation, missing perfect attendance by only one day to attend a funeral.

In his second year at VCU, Eddie's self-determination and curiosity began to take hold. He showed interest in his music appreciation class, working on his own at home and calling his education coach on weekends to ask questions about his writing assignments.

Eddie used a Livescribe pen during the music appreciation class. This is a high-tech pen that can sync with devices such as mobile phones and tablets to make note-taking easier. The Livescribe pen was important to Eddie's success in this class, due to the lecture style of the professor and the required note-taking.

Eddie clearly had a knack for using technology. In addition to the Livescribe pen, he easily used a screen reader after being shown how just once. During his second autumn at VCU, he received an early Christmas present: his own laptop.

Eddie began taking his own notes in Crime and Science, and his education coach gradually began to sit at the back of the class, only assisting with group activities. Outside of class, they began using Google Docs as a way to collaborate during the weekends. This method allowed the coach to provide clear feedback to Eddie on his writing assignments.

Eddie continued taking classes. His 2013 course of study included Introduction to Economics, Human Spirituality, and Introduction to Clinical Lab Services.

Eddie's last requirement at VCU consisted of an Independent Study that focused on internships in the community. The internships help students acquire new skills, apply their skills in a new setting, experience different work environments, and network with



Eddie and his self-portrait

businesses in the community. During his time as a VCU student, Eddie completed two job shadowing experiences and two community internships, and applied for numerous jobs.

Eddie participated in graduation with other VCU School of Education graduates, in full academic regalia, on December 14, 2013. The Dean of the School of Education gave him a special introduction and "shout-out." The audience joined in by congratulating the ACE IT graduates with a standing ovation!

As a result of Eddie's college experience, his reading skills improved. His résumé includes work experience at the VCU Cary Street Gym, at an orthotics company, and with a former museum director, where he sharpened his technology skills and learned to make plaster casts. He walks taller and more confidently, and he communicates more readily.

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Eddie says that going to college gave him a chance to "meet people and try different things." ACE IT, he says, "was a wonderful experience."