

STUDENT PROFILES

Brendon's College Experience Prepares Him to Be a Zookeeper

by Ross Hooley

From the moment you meet Brendon, you quickly notice his deep passion for and knowledge about animals. This interest started as a young child when on a visit to a local zoo with his family, he was amazed by the size of the elephants. From an early age Brendon always wanted to be a zookeeper and going to college has helped move this dream closer to reality.

Brendon is a friendly, helpful, dependable and hardworking man – all qualities that enabled him to get the most out of his time at Bridgewater State University (BSU), located in southeastern Massachusetts. He enrolled in the Excel Partnership Program at BSU, a fully inclusive postsecondary program for young adults with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities.

Through Excel, Brendon focused his coursework on broadening his knowledge of animals and animal behavior. During two of his three years at BSU, he lived on campus. This made it easier to make new friends and become more independent.

GOALS

1. To attend college and enroll in classes related to his career interests.
2. To become a zookeeper.
3. To develop independent living skills.

PLAN

At the start of his first year, Brendon met with Excel staff to help develop his short-term and long-term academic, social, and career goals. He was clear that his vision included obtaining a job working with animals at a zoo or aquarium.

Brendon periodically reviewed his goals with Excel staff during his weekly check-in meetings and at the start of each semester developed new short-term goals. At the end of each year Brendon prepared a PowerPoint presentation that summarized the progress he had made during the year. On one occasion, 28 people came to his meeting. Even though he felt nervous, Brendon kept calm and spoke with confidence.

College-based transition services is a transition model designed to improve post-school outcomes for students ages 18 to 21 who have intellectual disability and/or autism. This model supports students' enrollment in inclusive college classes, work experiences, and social networking opportunities on a college campus with their same-age peers, rather than having typical transition services in a high school setting.

LEARN

At BSU, Brendon took full advantage of the academic opportunities available to him. He applied himself in his studies with enthusiasm and commitment and focused on taking courses that would support his dream of becoming a zookeeper.

Brendon took a wide range of classes including biology, anthropology, and public speaking, but was particularly interested in courses that focused on animals. In his first year he took the "Monkeys, Apes and Us" class and hit it off with the instructor, who was a primatologist. One of his first assignments was to go to a local zoo and spend time observing the primates.

In Brendon's final year, based upon the recommendation of his instructors, he completed two classes for credit: "Media and Multiculturalism" and his favorite, "Biology and Behavior of Elephants." In all of his classes, Brendon excelled and received very good grades. He was extremely conscientious and determined to do his best.



One of Brendon's favorite courses: "Biology and Behavior of Elephants."

SUPPORT

Through the partnership between BSU and his local school district, Brendon received the support of an education coach. His coach attended classes with him and provided tutoring services, including explaining academic material and offering guidance and editorial input for assignments. Most importantly, he provided Brendon encouragement and reassurance.

During Brendon's final semester, BSU moved to an online learning format due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Brendon and his coach adjusted reasonably well to the sudden change. His coach continued to provide daily support via Zoom, email, phone calls, and texts. For Brendon's final research paper, his coach helped identify research sources and reviewed his paper for content, paragraph construction, and flow.

LIVING ON CAMPUS

During his second and third year, Brendon lived on campus as part of the Excel Residence Life program. He was nervous at first but quickly immersed himself into college life and joined Best Buddies, the Residence Hall Association, and BSU Program Council. With the support of his peer mentors, he attended campus events and activities and took the train into Boston to watch the Red Sox.

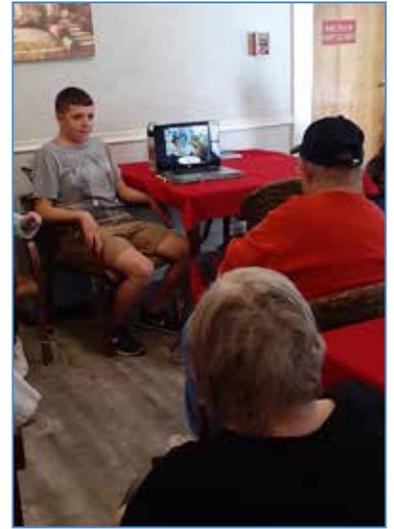
Brendon's favorite activities included going to football and baseball parties in his dorm, attending a therapy dog convention on campus, and going to "late night" breakfasts with his friends. He also learned how to do his own laundry and cook for himself. Unfortunately, after BSU switched to remote learning during the pandemic, Brendon had to move back home and missed out on all the end-of-year celebrations.



Brendon attending the Therapy Dog Convention on campus.

WORK

While at BSU, Brendon interned in the college mailroom and campus bookstore. However, it was his internship at a local nursing home in his final year where he really excelled. In this internship, Brendon gave weekly lectures to the residents on a specific animal. Over the course of several months, he presented on bears, Komodo dragons, rhinos, and snakes. Brendon would research the animal and then put together a one-hour PowerPoint slide show providing facts on the animal and its habitat. He was confident in his presentation, demonstrated a robust understanding of the topic, and captured the attention of his audience.



Brendon's internship included giving weekly animal lectures to residents at a nursing home.

In his final semester at BSU, Brendon was interviewed at a local zoo for their summer internship program. Unfortunately, this opportunity did not come together because of the pandemic.

OUTCOMES

Brendon's time at Bridgewater State University was life changing. He developed a broad foundation of knowledge and skills in animal science and demonstrated he could successfully complete classes at the college level. These experiences and knowledge will be attractive to potential employers. He also developed a strong network of college friends and continues to keep in contact with them through Zoom, chat, and text.

Today, Brendon works at a local supermarket. He is interested in keeping this job until a position working with animals becomes available. In the future, Brendon wants to work at a zoo taking care of the animals or as a tour guide. He also has expressed interest in possibly continuing his studies.

Brendon's positive transition experiences were the result of collaborative planning and supports between BSU, Somerset-Berkley Public Schools, The Nemasket Group (a disability support organization), and his family. Each stakeholder was committed to supporting Brendon's vision. As a result, he has developed greater confidence and self-determination and can now see a clear path to reaching his goal of working with animals.

BRENDON'S COURSE OF STUDY

	PLAN	LEARN	WORK	SUPPORT
Pre-College	Brendon was given information about the Excel program at BSU from the high school special education department.			Brendon became one of the first students from Somerset-Berkley to attend BSU.
Fall 2017	During his initial meeting with BSU staff, Brendon developed his academic, career, and social goals.	Monkey, Apes and Us	Internship in BSU mailroom	Brendon received support from an education coach for campus navigation, academic tutoring, and social/emotional support.
Spring 2018	Brendon developed great relationships with his professors and had discussions about course selection. He chose his public speaking class because of his interest in becoming a tour guide at a zoo or aquarium.	Intro to Public Speaking	Internship in BSU mailroom	Brendon's coach and faculty continued to bolster his confidence. His coach started to fade support as Brendon became more independent in his work.
Fall 2018	Brendon and his family expressed interest in the Residence Life program at BSU. He moved into his dorm in the fall.	Intro to Computer Apps Intro to Communication & Culture	Internship in BSU mailroom	Residential assistants and peer mentors welcomed the first cohort of students from the Excel program to the dorms.
Spring 2019	Brendon chose his fall classes because of his interest in learning more about different cultures and the recommendation of his professor to take an upper-level (300) class.	Biological Anthropology Human Geography Ceramics 1	Internship at campus bookstore	Brendon received support in the dorm from his peer mentors to develop his culinary and housekeeping skills.
Fall 2019	Brendon was excited to take classes for credit in his final year.	Media and Multiculturalism (credit) Evolutionary Nutrition	Internship at local nursing home	Brendon independently developed his PowerPoint presentations at the nursing home.
Spring 2020	Family use their personal networks to secure a job for Brendon after he leaves college.	Biology and Behavior of Elephants (credit) Human Biological Variation	Internship at local nursing home	Brendon's education coach continued to provide academic and emotional support remotely when classes went online during the pandemic.

The Think College Transition Model Project, in collaboration with three Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment partnerships developed and implemented a college-based inclusive dual enrollment transition model for students with intellectual disabilities and autism between the ages of 18-21.

