

SCHOOL *of* LIFE

Continuing education courses help build bright futures

BY JENNY LYNN ZAPPALA



OLS program graduate Nate Ward

Like any young man, Nate Ward of Redmond has dreams: a steady job, a good home and a happy marriage. He graduated from high school and worked part-time as a facilities technician at his church. But Ward's chances for success could be diminished because he has a cognitive disability, specifically autism. In King County, the number of people (ages 18 to 64) with cognitive disabilities is just over 50,000, with only 25 percent of those employed in any capacity. Most people with disabilities are paid minimum wage, if they are employed at all. Employment is the foundation for many dreams, from owning a home to starting a family.

"Cognitive disability" means students have serious difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions, which could interfere with their ability to learn in a traditional college environment. Students often have multiple diagnoses, which may include a significant

learning disability, sight impairment, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, an autism spectrum disorder or even a traumatic brain injury.

A group of parents believed their kids with cognitive disabilities were capable of achieving a better future. In 2001, parents in the Puget Sound area came together to create personal enrichment courses at Bellevue College's Continuing Education. The program grew.

In December 2006, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities accredited Occupational and Life Skills (OLS) as an associate degree offered by Bellevue College. Today, OLS is a four-year, 90-credit associate degree program designed for adults with cognitive disabilities

and the first of its kind in the nation. The program's intentionally slower, bit-by-bit pace helped Ward thrive.

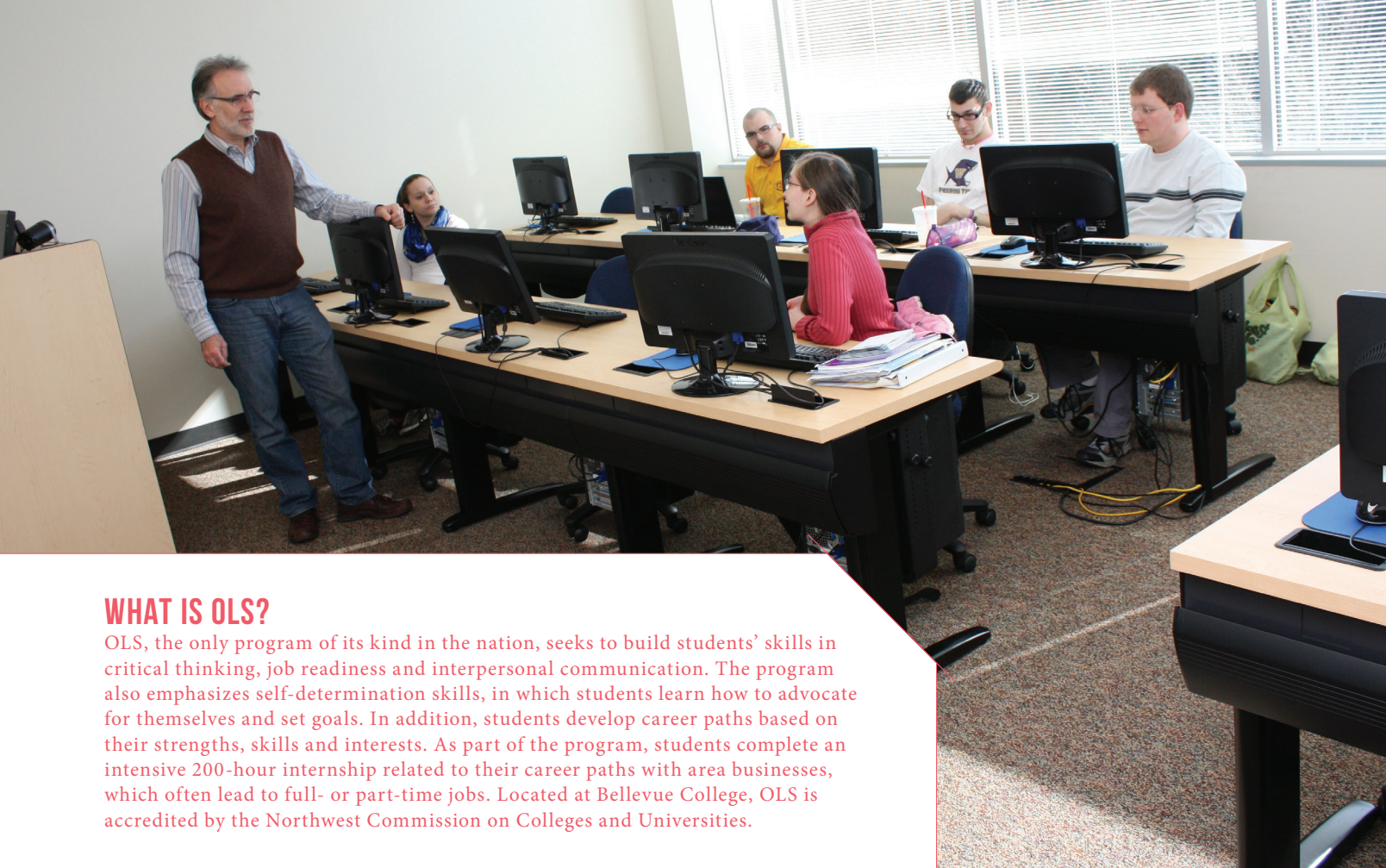
"Occupational Life Skills is a program designed to give students basic education and training they will need to succeed in everyday life," said Ward, who graduated from the program last year. "It's like taking bits and pieces you would take in

college and blowing it up — finances, eating healthy, lots of critical thinking, using your mind day in and day out and computer skills classes. What's great about it is the class sizes —

roughly 12 students or smaller. Instructors and students have one-on-one meetings and e-mail to make sure you meet your expectations within the program."

Success is measured by independence. In contrast to the general population, 89 percent of the 36 OLS program graduates were employed as of July, and the average >>

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WHAT IS OLS?

OLS, the only program of its kind in the nation, seeks to build students' skills in critical thinking, job readiness and interpersonal communication. The program also emphasizes self-determination skills, in which students learn how to advocate for themselves and set goals. In addition, students develop career paths based on their strengths, skills and interests. As part of the program, students complete an intensive 200-hour internship related to their career paths with area businesses, which often lead to full- or part-time jobs. Located at Bellevue College, OLS is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

pay is more than \$10 per hour. Of the four still seeking work, one is still in school seeking a bachelor's degree, one has a child, one is getting married this summer and one is unaccounted for. Many graduates are working more than 20 hours per week in skilled jobs with advancement opportunities. This fall, the program will be completely packed with 24 students.

"For me, it's the gateway to my future," said Ward. "If I look back at the last three years I have been there, I have learned things there I don't think I would have learned in any regular college. I used to be as lazy as they come. I am now more active. I used to be shy. Now I am more outgoing.

"I am now more organized than when a teacher in junior high was trying to get me organized," Ward said. "I could probably take credit for it, but it would take credit away from the instructors and counselors who helped me and helped other students achieve the goals that they want."



◀ **Marci Muhlestein,**
national director of OLS,
said one of the secrets
to the students' success is

the focus on soft skills: "Our kids are taught from day one how to be professional, how to be open-minded, how to collaborate. People with disabilities have a difficult time navigating that. Those nuances are hard for our students to do. Our curriculum is teaching our students how to manage time, how to collaborate, how to be professional, how to fit into a work culture."

A great deal of credit also goes to the partners, including businesses that offer internship opportunities, people who support scholarships and families of the students. The program is self-supported primarily through tuition. It's run like a small business. In particular, there is a critical need for scholarships and businesses where students can intern, said Muhlestein. Each student is required to complete a 200-hour internship and a senior project at a local business. The class also participates in community field trips and volunteer projects to give back to the community and practice teamwork.

Daniel Angellar, general manager at Redmond Marriott Town Center, who is an OLS board member and worked with Ward during his internship, not

only recommends hosting OLS interns but also advocates for it.

"Specifically speaking on behalf of Marriott, it has given us the opportunity to look at a spectrum of employees that meet a certain criteria that we are looking for in the hotels — employees that are able to come in and fill positions that are hard to fill," Angellar said. "It is important for the community to invest in this sector of employee because it is our community. As employers continue to look for qualified associates, OLS is offering opportunities to meet those needs by producing these qualified graduates. ... Take the risk. Qualified candidates want to do a day's work for a fair wage, and I guarantee you will learn more from them than they will from you."

As the first of its kind, the OLS program is growing and attracting attention as the national center of excellence for occupational and life skills. The goal is to grow from 70 to 100 students at the Bellevue campus and replicate the program at other campuses nationwide. Northwest Arkansas Community College is launching a pilot program in fall 2015. Some Washington schools

TO HELP

If you are interested in having an intern come to your business, supporting a scholarship, volunteering your time or exploring other ways of helping, contact ols@bellevuecollege.edu.

TO APPLY

The program has a selective admissions process. OLS periodically hosts information meetings for prospective students. For details, visit olsatbellevuecollege.com.

have expressed interest, but none has committed just yet. Muhlestein and her team have presented their work at several national conferences, including events for college presidents, leadership teams and disability resource centers at college centers.

“I am excited that the word is finally getting out and we are finally being able to break some ground in replicating the program in other places. I am excited about the students’ success stories and what they’ve been able to do after graduation,” said Muhlestein.

The graduates have landed in some interesting jobs: as administrative assistants, airplane parts workers, City of Seattle employees, dog sitters, educators in the school district and a production specialist at Genie Industrial.

For Ward, he’s had successes, too. He worked as a houseman at the Redmond Marriott Town Center shortly after he completed his internship there last spring. Then he landed a seasonal job during the holidays at Fred Meyer. He’s currently looking for a career where he can plant some roots — he has his eye on Costco and Microsoft. He’s engaged and the couple will set a date after he gets a job.

“I did what I set out to do, and it was very gratifying. It was an even better feeling knowing I have opened up the doors to the rest of my life.” 📧