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Students with Differences Included in UNF Graduation for First Time

Jacksonville, FL, May 25, 2022: The Arc Jacksonville is thrilled to announce that eleven students with intellectual differences graduated from the University of North Florida (UNF) through The Arc Jacksonville's On Campus Transition (OCT) college experience program on May 6th.

For the first time since the program's inception in 2006, these students were included in the traditional UNF commencement ceremony and walked alongside their peers at graduation.

Prior to 2022, OCT students graduated in a small ceremony, separate from the rest of the UNF graduating class. UNF student, Analyse Gammon, began volunteering with The Arc Jacksonville and served as a "Best Buddy" for OCT student Matt. Analyse decided that she wanted to advocate for her buddy, Matt, and all other OCT students to be included in graduation.

"Every part of OCT students' experience at UNF was inclusive until graduation," said Analyse. "I asked my professors how we could change that and started working to have UNF include OCT students in graduation."

Analyse started a petition and obtained over 700 signatures, as well as letters of support from dozens of UNF professors. In 2020, UNF faculty voted to allow OCT students to participate in the commencement ceremony moving forward.

The 2022 graduating class included Rebecca Barnett, Christian Bloomfield, Kestrel Bush, Alec Pequignot, Marston Weiss, Dorian Patterson, Henry Curran, Ja'nya Jordan, Madeline (Maddie) McQuade, Maxwell (Max) Kren, and Jared McGhee.

"My favorite thing about OCT was being on campus and my mentors. I enjoyed taking UNF classes," said Christian, who has already secured community employment starting this summer.

Since 2006, 78 students have graduated from OCT, many of whom traveled from all across the country to participate in this innovative program. During the 2021-2022 school year, 29 students were enrolled in OCT.

"I cannot express how very proud I am of the 2022 graduates of the On Campus Transition program. My heart is full, as it was a beautiful day for inclusion," said Ethel Still-Richardson, Educational Services Director at The Arc Jacksonville.

OCT was established in partnership with UNF to provide students with intellectual differences a more traditional, post-secondary education. Students become immersed in all aspects of college life by auditing UNF courses, joining campus organizations and clubs, and participating in recreational/leisure activities that are available to all UNF students.

OCT students have the opportunity to live in student housing, and receive small group tutoring and mentoring by UNF students. They follow a unique and customized plan for achievement, rather than a structured curriculum. Their individual program of study focuses upon academic enhancement, career development, university life, health/personal growth, and independent living.

“We are grateful to UNF for their continued partnership and support of inclusive education.” said Kari Bates, Executive Director of The Arc Jacksonville. “Congratulations to our capable, dedicated graduates, who have worked so hard to reach this achievement. The Arc Jacksonville looks forward to continuing to support them in whatever comes next.”

About The Arc Jacksonville

The Arc Jacksonville serves and advocates for individuals with intellectual and developmental differences to achieve their full potential and to participate in community life. Through incredible partnerships within the Northeast Florida community, The Arc Jacksonville, a local nonprofit, provides a full complement of residential, educational, training, work readiness, employment, mental health, and community inclusion initiatives.

Editor’s Note: The Arc Jacksonville is not an acronym and Arc should never be in all capital letters. When referring to the organization, please use The Arc Jacksonville, not The ARC, The ARC Jacksonville or ARC. The Arc Jacksonville should be considered as a title or phrase. Please refer to the individuals as having “differences” and not “disabilities.”

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