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Center for Persons With Disabilities

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PUTTING THE AUTISM PUZZLE TOGETHER

December 17, 2010 by JoLynne Lyon

The ASSERT classroom provides direct services to children with ASD—and it has more potential clients than it can serve.

This month, Utah State University experts in the autism field shared ideas on studying autism, working with the families of people who have autism spectrum disorder, and preparing them for life after high school.

Those at the autism summit work on different angles of the Autism Spectrum Disorder puzzle. Some provide direct services, others train leaders and self advocates, still others conduct research on the best treatments, offer technical assistance to communities or investigate the genetics of ASD. They represented the Center for Persons with Disabilities and three departments within USU's College of Education and Human Services.

Still, some common themes emerged. Direct service providers within the college often have many more potential clients than they can handle. Adults with autism—and many other disabilities—often struggle to transition to adult life, find work and live independently.

Those who attended the summit also discussed challenges specific to their own fields. Among their concerns:

- Although genetic research in autism is a very active field—and many research groups claim they have autism-gene associations—only a small percentage of autism cases can firmly be associated with genes, said the CPD's Dr. Anthony Torres.

- Trainees in the field who finish their college education are likely to enter a real world where resources are scant, especially when it comes to serving adults with disabilities. It makes educating future leaders difficult, said CPD Director Bryce Fifield. Should faculty members train students to follow advanced methods and practices that are not available in the real world, or educate them for the reality they will face when they graduate?

- Insurance companies balk at funding autism treatments in a field where evidence-based, successful approaches are just emerging.

Their conclusion: A more comprehensive approach between the many disciplines that work with ASD could help resolve these issues. The leaders within the College of Education agreed to share information across disciplines and departments to move toward that goal.