

PEERS®: A program for students on the autism spectrum

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by **Cindy Lau-Chan and Sherri Parkins, Counselling and Accessibility Services**

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There has been a steady increase in the number of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) attending Seneca. In 2014/15, there were 95 students with ASD registered with Counselling and Accessibility Services (CnAS). In 2017/18, there were 143 students with ASD registered with CnAS. Over this four-year period, 32 students with ASD and their social coaches participated in an innovative program called PEERS®, or Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills. PEERS® is an evidence-based, ecologically-valid program developed at UCLA by Dr. Elizabeth Laugeson, Founder and Director of the UCLA PEERS® Clinic, and Dr. Fred Frankel. PEERS® was developed to help participants navigate social environments and expand their skills in making and maintaining friendships. Seneca was the first college in Ontario to have certified PEERS® providers.

Seneca students who have participated in PEERS® reported that it has impacted their abilities to interact more effectively on campus, at job placements, and in their pursuits of personal interests. One young adult explained that they felt the PEERS® skills they learned significantly improved their confidence and overall well-being. A parent reported that “for the first time, our young adult was able to go through four interviews for a summer job and get the job! Clearly, they internalized and utilized the skills they learned in PEERS®, which have influenced their ability to cope with stressful situations and have success.”

Recently, 31 professionals from colleges, universities, and other organizations across Ontario attended a three-day training program delivered by Dr. Elizabeth Laugeson. Ongoing follow-up Skype meetings hosted by Sherri Parkins and Cindy Lau-Chan have supported participants with start-up challenges as they initiate PEERS® at their own institutions.



We are looking forward to further developments of PEERS® from UCLA's SEMEL Institute for Neuroscience and

Human Behavior as we continue to learn and apply best practices for students with ASD gained from offering the program here at Seneca.

We will be having an information night for potential PEERS® students and their coaches on Tuesday June 18, 2019 at 6:30pm. If you are interested in learning more about PEERS®, contact Cindy Lau-Chan ([cindy.lau-
chan@senecacollege.ca](mailto:cindy.lau-chan@senecacollege.ca)) or Sherri Parkins (sherri.parkins@senecacollege.ca). Our next PEERS® program will run again starting at the end of August 2019. We look forward to engaging another group of students and social coaches in this immensely effective program.

View the [June 2019 issue of the Academic Newsletter](#).

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