Announcer (00:00:03)

The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Adair Seifert (00:00:10)

Autism is a spectrum as diverse as the colors of a rainbow, where each hue represents the uniqueness of everyone.

April is Autism Awareness Month, and it's a great time to learn and celebrate the experiences, challenges and triumphs of those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

I’m Adair Seifert, and today, Dr. April Phillips, director of Bear POWER at Missouri State University, dives into the importance of autism awareness.

Dr. April Phillips (00:00:39)

I think awareness of autism in people has increased over time, not only among individuals but also in the medical community, schools and society. So, there's good things and not so good things with that awareness.

A lot of us could possibly be placed on the spectrum. We all learn differently. We can all have different social skills and communicate in unique ways.

I think there are some misconceptions as in if someone says they're on the spectrum or they're an autistic person, others might assume they wouldn't have social skills or they don't know how to communicate, or they might lose control of their emotions, which is not accurate. Just being an autistic person means that you learn differently. And everyone is individual, just like everyone else. There’s a saying that that says, when you've met someone with autism, you've met one person with autism. They might have common characteristics, but that doesn't mean that everyone has all those characteristics.

Adair Seifert (00:02:03)

She explained specific programs and resources available for individuals with autism or intellectual disabilities who wish to pursue higher education.

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So luckily, we now we have lots of choices and resources for people with different ability levels to go to Higher Ed.

So, there are resources through like at Missouri State, we have the Disability Resource Center that those people can get support that they need at that level if they need a little bit more significant assistance than Bear POWER at Missouri State might be a way to have that support system. We help with academics, and we help with social skills. We also help with independent living and job readiness.

Just because we're a different admission, they don't have to have like the certain GPA and testing scores to get into Missouri State. They had to show they have a disability, but they want to do more like Missouri State and West Plains. So, we have different avenues and it's nice that people have choices, and they can research which one is best for them.

Students that graduate from programs like ours have a higher percentage rate of being employed at least a year after completing a program like ours, living more independently, requiring less Social Security benefits, making more money than peers that are like them.

We've had 14 graduates from our program since we started, and then all of them are employed. Some are full full time; some are part time. It's whatever they have chosen to do. Some are still roommates with who they met here on campus. Some are living with friends or family. Everyone has found more purpose and happiness because of the skills they learned here at Missouri State and the friendships they made.

A lot of them have remained friends with the peer mentors we call ambassadors or graduate assistants that helped them while they were here. It's amazing.

Adair Seifert (00:04:14)

She explains how we can continue to foster a culture of acceptance and celebration of neurodiversity throughout the year.

00:04:22 Speaker 3

I think being aware of people if they tell you they're on the spectrum or an autistic person, I think just being open to how best they learn to communicate and just being a friend.

Just being a person that's kind to other people and saying, “hey, how are you doing and how can I help you,” or “what strengths do you have that you can teach me?”

00:04:45 Speaker 2

That was Dr. April Phillips, director of Bear POWER at Missouri State University.

I'm Adair Seifert for the Missouri State Journal.

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For more information, contact the Office of Strategic Communication at 417-836-6397, the Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.