

Public Service



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Dr. Anne Dickerson is a professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy at East Carolina University, where her innovations in driving and community mobility have made a tremendous difference for teenage drivers with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). The CDC estimates that over half a million people with ASD will be of driving age in the next decade.

Five years ago, Dr. Dickerson identified the need for a driver education program that met the needs of those on the spectrum. In partnership with another faculty member and several graduate students, Dr. Dickerson helped launch the Driving and Community Bootcamp for Teens and Young Adults with ASD.

Over the past five years, the program has helped eight to 12 teens each summer prepare to drive and learn how to use public transportation. Those in the program spend 35-40 hours learning through lectures, question and answer sessions, and even a role-playing activity where the students learn how to respond to a police officer in a traffic stop.

Not only has this helped teens who may struggle in social situations but it has also helped police officers involved in the program to learn how to approach someone who may have ASD.

A special feature of the program is a driving simulator, which allows the young drivers to learn how to appropriately use the wheel and pedals at the same time, something that can be difficult for those with ASD. In addition, the simulators provide a “playback” feature that allows the driver to see any mistakes they may have made while driving.

The program has received rave reviews from both participants and parents, and Dr. Dickerson's vision to begin the program five years ago has proven to be lifechanging for participants.

