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Academic Lecture Series Continues with Talk on Educating Educators On Youth With Autism

Jacqueline Kelleher, Sacred Heart University

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On Tuesday, February 28, Dr. Jacqueline Kelleher, representing the Isabelle Farrington College of Education, gave the third in a series of four lectures that make up Sacred Heart University’s Academic Research Showcase. The Showcase is part of this year’s Presidential Inaugural Lecture Series.

Her topic was Film and Perspective-Taking: Educating Educators on Youth with Autism, and she discussed the implications of using film to prepare teachers to teach students with disabilities. The goal, she said, is to provide inclusive education so that all students are treated equally and their learning styles are respected. The challenge is getting teachers to understand the way students with disabilities experience the learning process, respond to learning environments and to understand deficit-related characteristics so they can better empathize and know their student more fully. It’s also essential to see the ability and not be fettered by a disability diagnosis or educational classification, she said.

To make her point, she shared Dungeons and Distractions, a film created by a group of students with autism spectrum disorders, including her own twin sons, that allows viewers to experience first-hand the distractions and frustrations a student on the autistic spectrum may experience in an academic setting.

“We’ve come a long way since the days when those with mild disabilities were considered ‘uneducable’ and could not come to school because of laws put in place to drive exclusive practices, but we still have a long way to go,” she said. She suggests that if educators are ever going to successfully address the problems that come with students with disabilities – lack of access to programs, suspension and expulsion, dropping out and failure to graduate – they will need to learn to collaborate with other school-based staff for the good of the student and know when and how to advocate for training. They will also need to understand the characteristics of the student’s disability and the ways it makes him or her think differently. Finally, she said,
teachers need to engage and partner with parents. “Parents are experts on their own children,” she pointed out. “Training is an important, underutilized part of state and federal law. We need to advocate that those educating students with autism and other disabilities get the training they need.”

Her sons’ film came out of the need for authentic materials for the education of educators. In the future, she hopes to get funding to either expand the film to include additional parts of the school day and/or put together short films from the perspective of the other 14 disabilities that are covered by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

“We hope to inspire new ways of thinking and provide improved outcomes for students with disabilities,” she said. “We’re looking for additional funding to expand the current 10-minute piece into a live action 25-minute short that includes nonacademic areas, lunch, recess, bus experience and more.” Kelleher has also developed a research-based teaching guide to go with the current video case study simulation.

“This work at SHU fits with this year’s theme of ‘a time for new beginnings.’ I am excited by the many requests from districts, families and youth agencies for copies of the film and training materials,” Kelleher concluded.