John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. I'm John Boccasino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Matthew Falanga:

The best part of coming to Syracuse is making new friends, being involved on campus. It makes me feel very happy. I was born with a disability called Down syndrome, and it got me thinking that I want to celebrate my disability. I also want to help other people with disabilities feel better about themselves. Be proud of who you are. At college, it is important for people with disabilities to learn about these programs and know that they can go to college and start their new life.

Brianna Shults:

Having our students here on campus benefits the whole campus community. It helps make all Syracuse University students, better friends, better classmates, better coworkers, better community members. Having this experience and interaction with our students helps our whole campus think inclusively. It also helps our administration think differently and think more inclusively. We're able to adjust the way students access classes, or adjust how we interact with faculty to make sure that it is inclusive for all.

John Boccacino:

On today's episode of the 'Cuse Conversations podcast, we are going to spotlight the impact of Syracuse University's InclusiveU Program both on campus and in the world beyond. Thanks to an initiative from the Taishoff Center for Inclusive Higher Education, this brings students of all ages with intellectual and developmental disabilities to campus to experience college life in a fully inclusive setting. For many adolescent students, the pursuit of higher education when they have developmental disabilities can be filled with roadblocks, and it can be a daunting task, both aspiring students and their families, but InclusiveU equips our students with the necessary skills to thrive in the classroom and find a job after graduation. We have two guests as part of the podcast today from InclusiveU, and our first is Matthew Falanga, a junior who is majoring in communications. He enjoys public speaking and he's really making the most of his InclusiveU experience here at Syracuse, living in Haven Hall and serving as an InclusiveU Ambassador and student leader during the school year and participating in life-changing internships during the summer.

Matthew will be joined by InclusiveU Director, Brianna Schults, who travels across the country advocating on behalf of InclusiveU, with policymakers, politicians, and higher education leaders, while pushing for policy change to make higher education accessible for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Matt, thanks for making the time to join us.

Brianna Shults:

Of course.

John Boccacino:

Why did you want to attend Syracuse University?

Matthew Falanga:

So first of all, I wanted to go to college because I wanted to make new friends and get involved on campus and explore my career. I wanted to go to Syracuse because Syracuse is a place that has a program for people with disabilities called InclusiveU, and I love that.

John Boccacino:

It's a great program. It's very impactful. And you mentioned wanting to come to Syracuse because of InclusiveU. How has InclusiveU helped change your life?

Matthew Falanga:

So it changed my life to make new friends. I learned to navigate campus. Also, I have taken some great classes, and InclusiveU has mentors that helped me to be successful. At InclusiveU, it is okay for students to learn from their mistakes.

John Boccacino:

What are some ways the mentors have helped you with your academics?

Matthew Falanga:

To help me with my assignments to make sure that I'm doing great with my assignments. Doing test, finals, quizzes.

John Boccacino:

And that's got to make you feel pretty good knowing that there's a village supporting you, right?

Matthew Falanga:

Yeah.

John Boccacino:

How does that make you feel?

Matthew Falanga:

It makes me feel very happy and most pride that I felt inside of me. Feels really powerful.

John Boccacino:

Yeah, it's a really powerful community for sure. And the fact that you've been able to experience every part of life on Syracuse, including living in Haven Hall, what has it been like for you getting that chance to live on campus and live in a residence hall?

Matthew Falanga:

So I loved it. I lived in Haven Hall, Marion Hall and Ernie Davis Hall. I hang out with my friends. I have an RN that helps me, who gets me involved with campus activities like Orange After Dark and also a great person to talk talk was when I have problems. I have had the same roommate for all three years so far, and we get along very great.

John Boccacino:

How special is that for you to know that you're going to classes, you're living in the residence halls, you are a full-fledged Bleeding Orange student?

Matthew Falanga:

It makes me feel very happy. I was born with a disability called Down syndrome and it got me thinking that I want to celebrate my disability. I also want to help other people with disabilities feel better about themselves and whenever they get upset, I will always be a great listener. I also want people to know that we all matter and have unique abilities that we were born with.

John Boccacino:

You definitely are making a big difference on this campus. October is Down Syndrome Awareness Month, which we wanted to tie in this podcast, of course. And I wanted to segue to my next question about being an ambassador for InclusiveU and also a student leader. What has been your message when you're serving in those key roles as being an ambassador for InclusiveU?

Matthew Falanga:

So my message is, always be yourself and be proud of who you are. And the other programs for people with international disabilities at college, it is important for people with disabilities to learn about these programs and know that they can go to college and start their new life.

John Boccacino:

Well, speaking of starting your life, you have done a great job, again, taking this message on the road. I want you to tell our audience a little bit about your trip to DC. What were some of those lasting memories, and tell me a little bit about the trip.

Matthew Falanga:

Sure. So I loved flying on the airplane to dc. I also loved going on the tour of the White House, and the Capital. I didn't meet the president, but I did get to meet people who worked at the White House. We had a meeting with a constructional representative staff, and I got to share with them my experience at SU and why I am part of InclusiveU and who it's all about.

John Boccacino:

Yeah, that's a pretty cool opportunity. I know you didn't get to meet the president, but there's always your next opportunity, maybe to go to DC or travel and be again, this great representative for InclusiveU. Now we talked about you're not just having academic success. You had a really cool life-changing internship over the summer too. Tell me about this internship and how is that going to help you with your career goals?

Matthew Falanga:

So I worked two jobs this summer. One was the pet store. And my second was a summer internship with Disability Rights New Jersey. I worked on a project about voting rights for people with disabilities. I think this helps me with my career plans, practicing my public speaking. I would like to have a job to give me more pride, to open up more to legislation, to open up more ways for people to stand up for themselves.

John Boccacino:

And if you had think back, Matthew, my last question for you is this, if someone were to say, what has been the best part of coming to Syracuse University, what would you say?

Matthew Falanga:

Well, I would say the best part of coming to Syracuse is making new friends, making new relationships, being on campus and going to fun events, going to Orange After Darks, going to the campus store or going to the conference or something. It just takes me happy.

John Boccacino:

Matthew Falanga, I want to thank you for stopping by and sharing your story with us.

Matthew Falanga:

Thank you.

John Boccacino:

Now we want to bring on Brianna Schults, the director of InclusiveU. This is such a cool initiative. We have more than a hundred students who have pursued their academic dreams on campus as part of this program, giving the residence hall experience as well. Brianna, this program touches lives and it really is a transformative experience. What is it about the way InclusiveU is set up and the way that it's structured that stands us apart from our peers?

Brianna Shults:

So InclusiveU is the largest program in the country. We have 102 students and we are one of the earlier programs to exist. We are seen as the leader in the field, and we collaborate with others across the country and internationally. Our goal is to continue to push this field forward and think inclusively about all aspects of the college experience, and make sure we have full engagement and support from our campus community as well as the Syracuse community as well.

John Boccacino:

Why was this a challenge that you wanted to embrace of coming, especially knowing that this is an emerging program, what resonates about InclusiveU for yourself?

Brianna Shults:

I love what I do. I love to see what our students are experiencing daily. I love to see the growth in the students over the four years that they're with us. With any program you have your challenges, but working through those challenges and seeing the difference that we can make in the students who are with us and the students across the country is a really big impact, and I love that I'm a part of that.

John Boccacino:

And knowing that you're playing a role in changing up paradigms and changing up the thought process of higher ed should be open to everybody who has a desire to go pursue that knowledge. We have that slogan, knowledge crowns those who seek her, and InclusiveU students are so passionate about their educational pursuits. What was it like, can you think back to before InclusiveU, the need that wasn't being met for these students and how great was the demand to offer this type of program to students with developmental disabilities?

Brianna Shults:

When students with developmental and intellectual disabilities graduated high school, there was this cliff that many would drop off of. They would go from having this very broad educational experience to not being able to access opportunities like that. They would either need to make the choice to go find work,

go find a program that filled time in their day, doing sometimes volunteer activities, sometimes just activities to fill hobbies, or some of them stayed home.

So by being able to take the next step along with their peers from high school to enter higher education programs to continue their education and their knowledge and build the skills that they need to find not just work in an entry-level job or in one of the first jobs that many people have, this gave them the opportunity to define who they are, to have a career, and to have an experience that all of their other peers were afforded that they now get to go have to.

Our students are really seeking out educational opportunities at Syracuse University to help themselves be a better community member, to be an active participant when they go live in a community, they are working, they're volunteering, they're meeting neighbors and friends and being that neighbor and friend that everybody else has the opportunity to be.

John Boccacino:

I know there's countless examples you can think of, but what are some of the standard-bearer examples that demonstrate the profound impact that InclusiveU has had both on our students' lives and on campus and across the world?

Brianna Shults:

Having our students here on campus benefits the whole campus community. It helps make all Syracuse University students better friends, better classmates, better co-workers, better community members. Having this experience and interaction with our students helps our whole campus think inclusively. It also helps our administration think differently and think more inclusively. We're able to adjust the way students access classes, or adjust how we interact with faculty to make sure that it is inclusive for all. What has benefited our students has also worked for many matriculated students, or people working across the campus.

The support from the university has allowed us to integrate our students in many meaningful ways into coursework. Our students are over 300 classes a semester. We've had two students who were Remembrance Scholars. We've had a student who was an Unsung Hero. Many of our students hold e-board positions or executive board positions in clubs and organizations, and we offer many employment opportunities for students all across campus to work with our InclusiveU students. And it is just a really great way to network and connect and start to forge many relationships in many different areas.

John Boccacino:

InclusiveU students are in classes with the general body here on campus. How does that help the InclusiveU students development being side by side with their peers and not just being segmented off with other students who are like them with their intellectual and developmental disabilities?

Brianna Shults:

We're raising the expectation. We have high expectations for our students. And by raising that bar, our students meet that bar in many different ways. While our students audit their coursework, we are making modifications to keep it challenging but not overwhelming, and it allows students to still demonstrate that knowledge and to show what they're learning. And by continuing to raise that bar and put peers together and allow them to work alongside each other, everyone is learning and it is benefiting everybody in that classroom from the professor to the TA to the students working in groups with InclusiveU students. We've just really seen the impact all across the board.

John Boccacino:

And I love the collaboratives. Give us some examples of how the School of Education collaborates with the schools and colleges here to offer up again this game-changing program for our InclusiveU students.

Brianna Shults:

The School of Education has been a long-time partner with us and working to help support us in getting students in various areas across the campus. Really, our part is helping to open doors and having faculty support across campus to include InclusiveU students in our classes. Our students have gotten into new house classes. They have built their own networks with faculty. Campus including us in high profile, outward facing events like Boost the Cues. National marketing campaigns really reinforces that our work is a point of SU pride. Our long-time partner at the College of Professional Studies has also supported our growth and integration into SU systems from not only the course registration piece, but the professor's office, the financial aid office advising what School of Ed, College of Professional Studies, we have so many partners who have really supported our growth, but also continue to support the integration of our students into different areas of the university.

Most recently, we've been able to include our students in first year seminar and making sure that they, alongside of every other first year student, are expected to take that course to understand the university as a whole, to network and integrate with all of the first year students, and it's been really impactful for the students to be able to work alongside and be with others who are experiencing similar things in their first year.

We've also had a student who went with BPA and New House to the SULA program and the School of Education is also launching the first inclusive study abroad program in Italy this May, to have matriculated and InclusiveU students study together in Italy. And then we're going to figure out and do research on how we can expand upon this opportunity and scale up locations for different inclusive study abroad experiences.

John Boccacino:

It's really exciting and I know we'll get to what else is in store for the future of the program, but I think what I love the most, and I can tell in your voice, the passion that you bring for this work. What does it do for you when you see these students breaking down barriers? And like Matthew said, he's not someone who is disabled. He's differently abled, but he's able to much like his peers, come in, contribute and give back to this campus community. That's got to really be a powerful feeling for you.

Brianna Shults:

It's a great feeling for not only myself but our staff. We have a really awesome team who works really hard to make sure that our students are able to do what they want to do and have the college experience that they have in mind. I think the most important piece and the thing that our staff does really well is make sure that everything is student-centered.

Our students are really the focus of what we do, and if a student says, "I would really like to try this area," somebody is there to help them figure it out. Our students also surprise us a lot as well. They'll come to us and say, "Oh, I met with this person and I have this opportunity." Or even with Thomas a few years ago, he got to meet the chancellor and interview the chancellor for Thomas on the Town. And a lot of that is student-led, is student-driven. And I think that is a sense of pride for our team that we are creating this atmosphere and this environment on this campus to allow students to really go out and explore and try new things and find their identity in a way that every other college student does. They really have the college experience that any college student would have.

John Boccacino:

And I'm glad you mentioned Thomas Wilson. We had the pleasure and privilege of bringing this young man on the podcast about two years ago, talking about Thomas on the Town, his journalistic pursuits. That was one of our most well-received episodes, and I think with this episode with Matthew and you talking about the program, it just goes to show this isn't just a program that makes a difference here on the Hill. It makes a difference on Capitol Hill. It makes a difference when you go and take this act on the road When it comes to meeting with policymakers, politicians, and higher education leaders. What message do you tell those policymakers and changemakers when it comes to why InclusiveU is such a worthwhile pursuit?

Brianna Shults:

Our message is not only for our program, but for support and funding for the field as a whole. We don't want to be the only program that students attend. We know that there are not enough programs for students who want to go to college, so our message is that this work is important. This work needs support and funding, because there needs to be more programs like ours and we want to also think beyond college as well. We want to ensure that students are able to lead the lives that they want to live afterwards, and that goes for employment, community involvement, living situations. We have advocated for ending subminimum wage, closing sheltered workshops. The Higher Education Opportunity Act hasn't been reauthorized since 2008. These are all really important things to help individuals with disabilities lead lives beyond higher education and beyond college that are productive and meaningful, and they are still allowed to make choices and have these experiences beyond what we're able to offer here.

John Boccacino:

When you factor in us being this model program, and if our audience doesn't know, there was a really cool news item that came out. The B. Thomas Golisano Foundation recently awarded the Center on Disability and Inclusion, a $200,000 grant to help other schools and colleges create and enhance their inclusive college programs. How special is it for our program to kind of be viewed as the standard-bearer and the model for how all other programs should be created?

Brianna Shults:

This was a really exciting award for us, and it is really a reinforcement that we're doing this right. There are not enough programs like ours and our field is very collaborative and we truly want all students with intellectual disability who want to go to college to have that opportunity that fits their needs. And sometimes that need is a geographical need. Not everyone can get to Syracuse. Some people want to stay on the West Coast. The demand versus available opportunity and the capacity of these programs is something that needs support. And to be able to offer that support and to have it come from the Golisano Foundation, we are so thankful that they took the chance on us to build out this program and to be able to provide the type of support and knowledge that other programs are looking for.

John Boccacino:

I want to go back to the road show factor, because not only are we making a change here on campus, but you're meeting with again, these politicians on Capitol Hill. How do those sessions... I want to try to focus on the positives that come out of it. What are some ways that those meetings have led to tangible change when it comes to our program of InclusiveU and increasing its services, increasing the reach?

Brianna Shults:

These sessions really reinforce the importance of programs like ours. It also keeps us connected to policy makers at every level from the state to federally. For example, we were invited to the White House as Matthew had said, to represent inclusive higher education. This gives us visibility and signals the

importance of programs like ours. It puts us in front of the assistant secretaries. It puts us in front of commissioners. It also gives students the chance to advocate for themselves and their peers to continue this work once they leave SU.

We have advocated and have received money in the New York State budget to allocate funds to benefit students at InclusiveU. We're also still advocating for TAP funding that could support InclusiveU students and other programs in New York state that are comprehensive transition programs that students receive federal financial aid.

So a lot of these sessions lead to education and information and helping them understand what is actually coming across their desk. It's tying a student in a story to a piece of paper or words that they're reading in a policy, to make that more meaningful. It's also putting us in the forefront as the thought leaders, as the educators, as people that can be turned to, or called upon if they have questions, or if they're not quite understanding how this would impact students. So it puts us in a really great position to be visible and to continue sharing our story and how it's changing and evolving over the years.

John Boccacino:

Do you have any examples of meeting with politicians, or policy makers where you won them over? Whether it was meeting a student like Olivia Bassett from a couple of years ago or meeting a Matthew Falanga on the Hill?

Brianna Shults:

I would say when Olivia and I went to Washington D.C. As part of the Think College Policy Advocate program, we were at the end of the day, it was our last meeting of the day. It was getting late. It was 4:00 P.M. Everybody wants to get out of the office at that point. And we met with some staff members of one of the New York State Senator's office, and we could tell they just wanted to be done with their day. But after meeting Olivia and hearing Olivia's story and hearing what we had to say, they had so many questions. They had pages full of notes. And it was really cool to see the impact that Olivia's story had about her college experience and what she was doing after and how she was traveling to Austria to share the documentary she made with her former roommate.

You could see the impact of her words and her experience, and they didn't care what time that meeting ended after that. They wanted to keep talking to her. They wanted to know more. They wanted to know what systems we used, what systems didn't work. So that was a really cool moment. It may have changed the way they looked at the next policy that came across their desk, or it may change the narrative of something they were saying in the future. So that was a really impactful moment and a really nice moment to end our day on, especially after lots of visits in Washington. D.C.

John Boccacino:

And Olivia just has this infectious personality. I can just imagine her going up and talking to the leaders with a no-fear attitude and telling her story. It's so cool to hear how these people who are on the Hill want to hear the stories and they become converts who want to support whatever they can to give back to InclusiveU. You mentioned the abroad perspective, and that's really, really exciting and one of our key pillars of our strategic plan has been the Syracuse Abroad opportunities for students to go and travel. What do you think, how is that going to enhance the InclusiveU experience giving these students a chance to travel and see the world?

Brianna Shults:

As I've said, we are constant collaborators, so being able to find a way to have the study abroad experience for our students as well, I think shows the commitment that the university has made to study abroad. But also, it helps us in showing programs in other countries that this is possible that you can do

this with students with intellectual disability, that they can go to college and they can have these experiences and we can partner with them to be able to help them figure that out.

I think it also will give a really unique perspective to those on that trip with InclusiveU students and matriculated students. I think it will be a really cool look at traveling and experiencing life together and being really immersed in a culture. There's bound to be ways that things are perceived and different things are viewed, and I think that is really valuable for the students on those trips.

John Boccacino:

InclusiveU is always keeping an eye on the future. What's next for our program and how can we really continue to stand out as a leader in this field?

Brianna Shults:

I think for our program, the next steps are continuing to grow. We want to enhance our student experience. We want to ensure our students have full access to the opportunities that they want on campus. We're building out our technical assistance capacity to help more programs in New York State and beyond. We want to continue to center the student voice and ensure that they have opportunities, and the opportunities that they want. We also want to improve our tracking of post-College data, our employment outcomes student narratives. This data and these concrete examples helps to create that systematic change when you have numbers and information to support the stories that you're telling. We're also continuing on with... We host the National Conference in Inclusive Higher Education and run a parallel student leadership conference alongside of that to give students opportunity to also have that experience, and that is something that we are continuing to build and grow and locate all across the country.

It's a traveling conference and it only comes to Syracuse once every three years. So being able to move this conference around the country and have it access different populations of people and students really helps to grow the field in itself and give different perspectives and support other programs in accessing this information, so that it's not just in one location and that it could be hard to get to. We really want to break down those barriers and offer this information and opportunities for all, because we want to lift everyone up. We want to be able to make sure that everybody is running an inclusive program that they want, and to be able to offer opportunities to students with intellectual disability.

John Boccacino:

For more information on the InclusiveU program, you can go to taishoffcenter.syr.edu/inclusiveu. It's really going to be exciting to watch where you guys continue as a collective to take the InclusiveU program. I'm excited to watch these changes and these great impactful programs continue to make a difference and change the lives of our students. And I want to thank Brianna Schults for stopping by. Keep up the great work.

Brianna Shults:

Thank you so much.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. My name is John Boccasino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.