A new pilot program, housed at the Center for Persons with Disabilities at Utah State University, will make history when the fall semester starts in August. The program, called Aggies Elevated, offers an inclusive post-secondary college experience for young adults with intellectual disabilities.

Aggies Elevated is the first program of its kind in Utah and is one of only a handful of programs west of the Rocky Mountains. The first cohort of eight students was on campus last week for Student Orientation and Registration (SOAR) and will return in August to begin working on a two-year certificate that will emphasize independent living skills and employment opportunities.

The students were chosen through a rigorous application and interview process. They will live in on-campus housing and attend inclusive classes with their neurotypical peers.

Sarah Stone, a Cache Valley native and a graduate of USU’s special education transition specialist master’s program, is the director of Aggies Elevated. She also earned her undergraduate degree in special education with an emphasis on severe disabilities at USU. She taught for a total of five years in the special education life skills classroom at Sky View High School in Smithfield, and for one year at Birch Creek Elementary School, also in Smithfield.

“I’ve been working with people with disabilities since middle school,” Stone said. “It’s been a passion of mine for a long time.”

Stone said the students who have been accepted into the program

The program will also give back to the university, Stone said, by supporting the Disability Resource Center and the Academic Resource center to serve the “in-betweeners,” or students who may not be eligible for accommodations, but still need a little bit of support.

“We can offer support and accommodations for professors and students to make their education experience as successful as possible,” she said.

Stone said the Aggies Elevated students will face the same challenges as any other college freshman.

“They’re just like any other student,” she said. “They’ll be learning and growing, learning how to read body language, and like any other freshman, they’ll struggle with homesickness, waking up on time and getting to class on time.”

Peer mentors and tutors will provide support to the students as needed.

The Aggies Elevated program space, located in CPD 174, will be sort of like a “home room,” Stone said—a safe space where the students can ask questions and know they’re welcome. Study groups, which will supplement what is being taught in classes, will meet there, and students can practice social skills in an informal way.

Find out more information on Aggies Elevated
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