

R E E A D Y

SOONER WORKS LAUNCHES ITS FIRST GRADUATES WITH LIFE SKILLS,

— *for the* —

FRIENDSHIPS AND A PRICELESS YOU EXPERIENCE. BY TAMI ALTHOFF

W O R L D



**B**O COCHRAN LOOKS down at his fitness watch. It's 11 a.m. on a Tuesday, and he's already logged a significant number of miles.

"I like to do my exercises," he says, adding he walks an average of 12 miles a day.

Cochran logs many of those steps through his internship with the Pride of Oklahoma Marching Band. As a member of the logistics team, he helps set up for practices and provides support on game days. The rest are acquired walking around the University of Oklahoma's Norman campus, where he attends classes, and at the Jimmie Austin OU Golf Club, where he earns tips cleaning golf carts.

Internships, classes and living on campus may seem like routine activities for a college student, but for Cochran, the opportunity is a gift made possible through Sooner Works, a program that began in 2019 with just three students—Cochran and cohorts Madison Mason and Peyton Dumas.

An inclusive, post-secondary education (IPSE) program for students with mild to moderate intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, Sooner Works allows uniquely abled students the opportunity to attend classes, hold a job and even be a part of fraternities, sororities and other student organizations. Students live in OU residence halls and, in some cases, apartments or rental homes.

Sooner Works, which is recognized as a comprehensive transition program by the U.S. Department of Education, is offered through the OU Zarrow Institute on Transition & Self-Determination.

Based on similar offerings at universities like Clemson and Texas A&M, Sooner Works is a four-year certificate program featuring mainstream OU courses, along with a specific Sooner Works curriculum to help students develop life skills necessary to thrive while living and working independently. Each student participates in internships either on or off campus, with juniors and seniors holding paid internships.

"We like to say this program is the next stage of inclusion at the university level," says Kendra Williams-Diehm, Zarrow Institute director. "We have high expectations for our students and they are held accountable. It's not a charity, feel-good organization. It's a college program, and our members are 100% OU students."



Sooner Works Peer Partner Chris Loerke, left, Bo Cochran, Peyton Dumas and Madison Mason in front of freshman residence hall Adams Center.

There are currently 24 students in the four-year program, and eight freshmen are set to begin next year. While there is capacity for 48 students, Williams-Diehm says funding doesn't yet support those numbers.

Rylee Murray, Sooner Works social worker and instructor, says to qualify for the program students must be between the ages of 18 and 26 and diagnosed with an intellectual and/or developmental disability.

"Students who would be a great fit would also have the motivation to be successful as a college student, the ability to live independently, the capability to adapt to change, no significant behavioral or emotional difficulties, and a basic understanding of reading and writing," says Murray. "We have accepted students with a wide variety of disabilities including, but not limited to, Autism Spectrum Disorder and Down Syndrome."

Cochran, a percussionist, has focused on music courses and honing his conducting skills while at OU. He plans to continue working with the OU School of Music after graduation.

"Bo speaks in music," says his mom, Kari Cochran. "There is something very organic about how he can relate to music and apply the skills he's learned. If there was a way, we would have him continue in any and all music classes available. For Bo, it is a natural extension of himself to take music classes and be involved in OU's music program."

Peyton Dumas says his coursework has focused on health and nutrition. He interned at OU's Sarkeys Fitness Center and, like Cochran, enjoys exercise.

"I want to become a fitness instructor," he says. "I was overweight when I was younger, so I work out a lot. I feel a lot better."



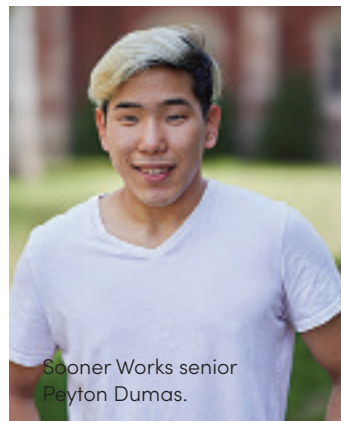
Bo Cochran and family celebrate his acceptance into OU's Sooner Works program.



Chris Loerke and Madison Mason at an OU home football game.



Bo Cochran on the first day of classes August 2021.



Sooner Works senior Payton Dumas.

TRAVIS CAPERTON

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— RYLEE MURRAY

Dumas also spends significant time with his fraternity, Brothers Under Christ (BYX), and participates in OU's annual Sooner Scandals music revue. He says he enjoys acting and hopes to join a community theater after graduation.

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Another way Sooner Works helps integrate its members with other OU students is through an affiliate program, Peer Partners. OU students can volunteer with Peer Partners, serving as mentors to Sooner Works participants.

Madison Mason, who is enthusiastic and social, says the partners are a special



Sooner Works students at a going away party for founding associate director Mindy Lingo, center.

part of Sooner Works. She remembers her first experience as a new student.

“In August 2019, we did Move-In Day. I moved in and my family helped set my room up. It was exciting,” she says. “I got to do a campus tour with my male Peer Partner, Chris Loerke. He showed me around, where the museum is, and all the history.”

Mason says she appreciates going out to lunch, dinner and movies with her partners.

“We also do Halloween parties, Valentine’s Day parties,” she says. “I enjoy dressing up and having fun.”

Kimrey Klamm is the student socialization intern for Sooner Works. An early childhood education junior, Klamm found out about Sooner Works and Peer Partners when she had a class with one of the students her freshman year.

“I immediately knew that this was something I wanted to be a part of. I quickly became acquainted with Peyton, Bo and Madison. From the moment I met each of

“I think Sooner Works is an incredible opportunity because it allows the partners to learn to work with all kinds of students and to take an active role in making OU a more inclusive campus.” —KIMREY KLAMM

them, I knew Sooner Works was special because of the people they selected to be in the program,” she says.

“Peyton always has a joke and is ready to hang out or work. Bo is quick to tell you about his music, and he is always

ready to smile or dance. Madison refers to herself as ‘The First Lady of Sooner Works.’ She comes to every event with a smile on her face and makes sure that everybody is happy and having a good time. To say work-



Peyton Dumas, second row left, and his Beta Upsilon Chi fraternity brothers prepare to perform for OU Scandals.



Bo Cochran and Madison Mason with "Mr. OU" at a football game.



Madison Mason and Sooner Works Peer Partner Jenna Lee Smith.

ing with these three students has been amazing is an understatement.”

Klamm says Peer Partners provide Sooner Works students with both friendship and advocacy on campus. She says most students have at least three partners, with a goal of spending time with a partner at least once a week. More than 100 OU students have expressed interest in being a Peer Partner.

“My personal goal for each Sooner Works student is for them to know they have friends on campus who support them,” Klamm says. “I think Sooner Works is an incredible opportunity because it allows the partners to learn to work with all kinds of students and to take an active role in making OU a more inclusive campus.”

Since starting the Sooner Works program, Mason has moved to an apartment off campus and learned to navigate Norman using the city bus system.

Dumas has entertained the idea that it might be possible to become a professional actor.

Cochran has forged a friendship with Mason that he says will last a lifetime, learned to love his independence, and created a dream job for himself in instrumental music conducting.

“I am hopeful that nontraditional avenues may arise that can help him reach this goal,” Kari Cochran says. “He has made so many friends and connections in the band programs at OU; as these individuals enter into their post-graduate worlds, I believe they will open doors for Bo that we have not even thought of.”

In May, Mason, Dumas and Cochran culminated their time with Sooner Works by participating in the pinnacle of the college experience—graduation. All three were excited about senior pictures, trying on caps and gowns, taking part in Commencement and earning their certificate of completion.

They’re also eager to see what they can achieve beyond college, as are their families.

“We had planned for Bo to be with us for a lifetime. That he can now be independent

and has the voice to advocate for himself is amazing. Sooner Works has provided an avenue for him to achieve these things,” Kari Cochran says. “If you had asked us four years ago whether he’d be able to accomplish what he has, Bo would have said yes, and we would have been hesitant. I hope he always proves us wrong with his accomplishments.”

Williams-Diehm says her staff has learned just as much from Sooner Works students, especially the inaugural cohort.

“This first class has helped us so much. Their parents have been supportive and forgiving, and we are so grateful for that,” she says. “I can remember these three as freshmen, and we all sat in the office wondering how this was going to work. Now to see them independently maneuvering around town, it’s wonderful. They’ve gone through that college transformation, and they’re ready to become adults. They are totally trailblazers.”

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