

# Transfer student pushes to help autism community through research at ASU

Jacob Sorenson is taking advantage of his time at ASU through autism research.



First-year transfer student and applied biological science major, Jacob Sorenson just took his first steps into the ASU scene this year bringing with him big plans to expand autism research.

Before transferring, Sorenson went to Mesa Community College for two years. With help from Jennifer Wood, honors director at MCC Red Mountain campus, he involved himself with a service project for the autistic community that set him on his route to ASU.

"He is one of the finest students I've worked with," Wood said. "He is very goal-oriented."

It all began when Sorenson volunteered for a teacher at Gilbert Elementary School where he created hands on math activities for autistic students. Overall, he created about 80 activities like math lessons that included more hands-on objects that would help the students further visualize the lesson.

“They think a little differently,” Sorenson said. “They like to work with their hands, so these activities help them learn just like any other sixth-grade student.”

Sorenson delved into the service project even further by teaming up with the [Autism Society of Greater Phoenix](#) to duplicate these activities for Mesa public schools to use. Together, they also created a program at MCC that teaches students how to properly teach and work with autistic students.

After he established a relationship with the society, he began partnering with them on a more continual basis, working in collaboration with them to found what they called the [Lego Club](#). The club allows families with an autistic child to come in and relax while their child plays. The club began in August 2015 and has steadily grown from there.

“Legos are their number one thing,” Sorenson said, referring to a favorite toy of the children.

According to Sorenson, a large part of choosing ASU, among other advantages, was to focus on autism research with Dr. James Adams. Adams conducts research on the causes of autism and ways to prevent and treat it.

As a Barrett, The Honors College student, Sorenson has to conduct a thesis before he graduates. He's currently working with Adams on that thesis to study the correlation between prenatal vitamins and a child being born with autism.

“Right now we are finding the optimal dosages of vitamins and minerals that go into prenatal supplements,” Sorenson said. “If the mothers are taking in the right supplements, the right vitamins, the right minerals, it decreases the likelihood that they will have a kid with autism.”

Sorenson said the benefits of the honors college, the connection with the Mayo Clinic, a school he would like to go for medical school, and his ability to stay close to family were what sealed the deal with ASU.

“ASU is a place I always imagined myself going,” Sorenson said.

After finishing his thesis in the spring, Sorenson already has plans to start another project for senior year. He hopes to study proteins in the brain and their effect on someone having autism.

“I believe having that training, that knowledge about the body and the brain, will give me more of a push just to have all of the knowledge necessary to work with people and the brain,” Sorenson said.

Having already started studying for the Medical College Admission Test and his research with ASU, Sorenson hopes that with a good score he could get into a top graduate school like Mayo Clinic.

“There is definitely a push to help the autistic community,” Sorenson said. “There are not enough physicians or researchers, in my opinion, that are helping that field, so that's something I'd definitely look into.”

Sorenson was awarded the [Undergraduate Transfer scholarship](#) with the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. According to Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, the scholarship, which can provide up to \$40,000 per year,

is intended to cover a significant share of educational expenses for students who show persistence, leadership and service to others.

Sorenson said he has received about 25 scholarships in the past three years totaling over \$180,000.

“It was definitely a humbling experience to know that people want to invest in your future,” Sorenson said.

Senior political science major [Andrew Sypher](#) was named [All-Arizona and All-USA Academic Scholar](#) and awarded the [Phi Theta Kappa 2015 Hites Transfer Scholarship](#). Sorenson recognized Sypher's success and reached out for guidance and a mentor during his time at MCC, Sypher helped Sorenson realize his objectives and find scholarships so he could attend ASU. The two remain close friends and encourage each other to achieve their goals.

“Jacob is extremely disciplined,” Sypher said. “He’s naturally smart, he’s gifted, but he doesn’t rely just on his intelligence that he came with. He works extremely hard to improve and to reach whatever goals he wants.”

When Sorenson finishes medical school, he would love to provide aid to poorer communities and make service trips around the world.

Sorenson said living in Mozambique for two years during a mission trip and seeing how little opportunity they have to live out their dreams is what motivates him in all of his endeavors.

“I knew I could basically obtain anything I wanted to in the United States and I don’t take that for granted ever,” Sorenson said. “I think of how blessed we are here in the United States to literally do anything we want if we work hard enough.”

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