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ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Editorial: Key to college access in Missouri is reversing funding trend

By the Editorial Board | Posted: Monday, September 12, 2011 12:00 am

No MU mention

Four numbers, when considered in their relationship to each other, should scare the heck out of anybody concerned about the future of Missouri's young people and the state's economy.

- Only 24.6 percent of Missouri's residents 25 or younger have college degrees. That ranks Missouri 34th in the nation.

- Missouri's state tax burden, the amount of state tax dollars per person spent on things such as higher education, is 44th lowest in the nation.

- Two-thirds of employers in the St. Louis region say they have difficulty finding qualified employees to fill open jobs.

- The difference between the yearly earnings capacity of somebody with a college degree and a person the same age with only an eighth-grade education is about \$72,000.

Added up, these numbers mean that Missouri continues to short-change spending on education. The result is that fewer Missourians are getting the degrees they need to enter a workforce that needs them. Jobs remain open or are filled by less-productive workers. And the economy suffers both in terms of reduced production and potential tax income from higher earnings.

This is Missouri's reality. All the talk about economic development schemes, some of which we support, emanating from the Capitol this week will be meaningless unless these numbers are reversed. That should be a topic for discussion this week when the National College Access Network convenes its annual convention in St. Louis.

Educational professionals — those trying to help high school kids afford college and those at the university level recruiting students — will discuss the nitty-gritty of how to prepare young people for higher education and how to make sure they have access to the tools they need.

There are tools available. The St. Louis Regional College Access Pipeline Project, for instance, is a cooperative of industry and education leaders working together to help more middle-class

and poor children afford the education that will give them hope for a brighter and more lucrative financial future.

That project demonstrates how important some business leaders consider higher education to this region and its linkage to the state's future.

But it will take more than nibbling around the edges to make a difference.

On Tuesday, higher education policy analyst Tom Mortenson of the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education is scheduled to give a talk at the college access convention that asks the key question: "Can Higher Education Keep Up?"

In Missouri, the answer today is no.

Higher education is falling farther behind. And we're leaving behind our future earners, our employees, our taxpayers, our economic hope.

Here's another statistic: For the first time in our nation's history, the amount of debt parents and students owe for college loans has surpassed the amount of outstanding credit card debt. The change is easy to explain. States have stopped paying for higher education, and tuition has gone through the roof as a result.

The solution, too, lies in the numbers.

Missouri must decide to improve state support for higher education. That means higher taxes. Being a low-tax state hasn't worked any economic miracles. Maybe being an average-tax state would help.

That investment will pay dividends in individual and business financial growth, producing future revenue streams that right now are but a wistful dream.

KC Fed chief emerges as UM candidate **Hoenig retires from current post Oct. 1.**

By Janese Silvey

The outgoing president of the Federal Reserve Bank in Kansas City has emerged as a candidate for the University of Missouri System presidency.



Thomas Hoenig

Thomas Hoenig is retiring from his current position Oct. 1. A source familiar with Hoenig told the Tribune his candidacy has been discussed in Kansas City circles and at a recent Missouri football game.

Curators denied that they've narrowed candidates down to a single finalist, but Columbia Curator Craig van Matre confirmed Hoenig is a candidate.

"He's one of several people the full board has interviewed," van Matre said. "We're not anywhere close to saying with board consensus who should get the job."

Van Matre said he expects a president to be named in about two months.

Hoenig is leaving the Federal Reserve Bank as the result of rules that require retirement at age 65. He will not comment on the university position until after he retires, a spokesman for the Federal Reserve in Kansas City said.

He has served in the role for 20 years — making him the Fed's longest-serving regional bank president. Hoenig is known for being a critic of Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke and his policies to jump-start the economy.

"I like his independence and what he's done for the Federal Reserve in Kansas City," said Robert Weagley, chairman of personal financial planning in MU's College of Human and Environmental Sciences. "He's not been afraid to speak his mind."

Hoening would bring a business background to the position similar to that of former UM System President Gary Forsee, who resigned in January. But unlike Forsee, Hoening has a doctorate and has served as an instructor at UM-Kansas City.

Weagley said he hadn't pictured Hoening in a university role before learning of his candidacy today but said he sounds like a good fit, having both an understanding of economics in an era of dwindling resources and some classroom experience.

"He could actually provide some good leadership and real opportunities for our campuses and system," Weagley said.

The Board of Curators is expected to meet in closed session tomorrow morning, in part to discuss "personnel items," but spokeswoman Jennifer Hollingshead said the presidential search process is not on the agenda.

Board Chairman Warren Erdman would neither confirm nor deny that Hoening is a candidate and repeated his earlier statements that the search process is open.

"The practical reality is we really haven't looked at any new names for some time, though," he said. "The process is progressing." Hoening is a member of the board of trustees of the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation and on the board of directors of Midwest Research Institute. He also has served on banking advisory boards for UMKC and MU.

Derrick Washington guilty in sexual assault

Former Missouri running back Derrick Washington was found guilty Wednesday of felony deviate sexual assault.

Washington was accused of sexually assaulting a 24-year-old University of Missouri graduate who was his former tutor. The case was sent to the jury around 3:15 p.m. Wednesday.

Sentencing was set for Nov. 7. Washington listened to the verdict at the Boone County Courthouse with his head in his hands.

Washington's accuser, who no longer is affiliated with the university, told the jury she was asleep June 19, 2010, in her Campus View apartment after a night of drinking when she was awoken by a stranger in her bed and "fingers in my vagina."

She said Washington shared a "friends with benefits" relationship with her roommate Lauren Gavin, and Washington was known to visit the apartment during the early-morning hours. The victim said she tutored Washington for two semesters before the alleged assault.

Washington's attorney, Christopher Slusher, argued that the victim and Gavin fostered hard feelings against the athletic department and athletes. During her deposition, the victim referred to the athletes she tutored as "children" and said although she associated with athletes through the programs, she had no romantic interest in them.

Washington hugged family members at the conclusion of testimony Wednesday as a Boone County jury entered deliberations.

Six men and six women weighed two days of evidence.

The charge is one of two criminal allegations that led to Washington's dismissal from the football team last year. The other case involves domestic violence allegations from an ex-girlfriend who said Washington hit and choked her. That case, involving misdemeanor charges, is scheduled for a Sept. 30 court trial.

The state rested its case at 11 a.m. Wednesday after calling four witnesses. The defense focused its evidence on a registered nurse who found no signs of trauma during an exam of the victim, as well as a "lack" of investigation by the University of Missouri Police Department.

The victim claimed to be a virgin, but it is common for trauma to not be discovered after an assault, according to testimony.

Detective Sam Easley testified that fingerprints were not taken from a doorknob Washington would have turned to enter the closed bedroom. Bed sheets also were not collected for potential DNA evidence.

MU "police could have taken something, but it's not going to show you anything," said Andrea Hayes, Boone County Assistant Prosecutor, during closing arguments.

But Washington's defense centered on the testimony of the victim's roommate. Slusher told the jury Gavin and the victim had hard feelings toward the athletic department and lied to police.

Gavin said she was raped by an athlete in January 2010 and was hurt by how the basketball team soon after shunned her away from socializing. She said she spoke with MU investigators but chose not to cooperate with the investigation.

During her first interview with MU police concerning Washington, Gavin left out several details that became key to the state's case. Weeks later, her account during an interview with prosecutors placed Washington in the victim's room for potentially three minutes.

"I felt like I had an allegiance to Derrick. He was my friend, too," Gavin said of not being forthcoming during her initial interview.



Alleged victim, roommate testify against Derrick Washington

By Brennan David Columbia Daily Tribune

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Updated September 21, 2011 at 3:37 p.m.

A 24-year-old Missouri graduate and previous tutor to former Missouri running back Derrick Washington accused Washington in court yesterday of sexually assaulting her and described the atmosphere of the athletic department tutoring program as "horrific."

Opening statements in the case against Washington began yesterday afternoon in Boone County Circuit Court. Washington is charged with felony deviate sexual assault. The charge is one of two criminal allegations that led to Washington's dismissal from the football team last year. The other case involves domestic violence allegations from an ex-girlfriend who said Washington hit and choked her. That case, involving misdemeanor charges, is scheduled for a Sept. 30 court trial.

Washington's accuser, who no longer is affiliated with the university, told the jury she was asleep June 19, 2010, in her Campus View apartment after a night of drinking when she was awoken by a stranger in her bed and "fingers in my vagina." The assailant did not speak.

"I've never been so scared in my life," she said, noting that she remained still as her assailant, recognizing she had tensed up, slowly exited her bedroom.

She said Washington shared a "friends with benefits" relationship with her roommate Lauren Gavin, and Washington was known to visit the apartment during the early-morning hours. The victim said she tutored Washington for two semesters before the alleged assault.

In the hours before the incident, the woman testified she had a couple of beers before meeting friends at a downtown Columbia bar and drinking seven beers there.

Defense attorney Christopher Slusher argued with the number of beers she claimed to have had based on a \$15 bar tab during a \$1 drink special. Calculating a generous tip, he suggested to the jury the victim had about 10 beers at the bar. The woman conceded she is "no lightweight" when it comes to drinking beer. Gavin described the woman as "tipsy" when she returned home.

Before going to bed, the woman said, she spoke to Gavin and understood that Washington would be coming over later. Gavin testified this morning that Washington arrived later but did not immediately enter her room. Washington was away for three minutes, and when Gavin asked where he had gone, he admitted to being in the victim's bedroom, she said.

Gavin said Washington was interested in the victim, and Gavin was upset that Washington awakened her roommate and they began to argue. She testified that Washington told her, "Whatever, Lauren," and that he was just playing with her "cooch." Gavin said she assumed Washington was exaggerating, and Washington did not leave until they concluded sex.

Terrified to leave her bed, the victim said she remained still until she heard the front door close, indicating Washington left. She testified that she then told Gavin that Washington had inappropriately touched her. But with the woman never physically identifying Washington as the assailant, Slusher yesterday questioned the timing of incriminating statements the roommate made weeks after the alleged incident and her role in a similar accusation against an athlete in January 2010.

"Saying something doesn't make it true," Slusher said.

He alleges the victim and Gavin fostered hard feelings against the athletic department and athletes. During her deposition, the victim referred to the athletes she tutored as "children" and said although she associated with athletes through the programs, she had no romantic interest in them.

Much of her disinterest in having a romantic relationship with an athlete stems from her time with the Total Person Program, the athletic department's tutoring program, she said. She accused athletes of making inappropriate sexual comments to tutors and described the sexual environment between tutors and athletes as "horrific."

After the defense called additional witnesses, closing arguments were made Wednesday afternoon, and the case was sent to the jury around 3:15 p.m.

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Study shows keys to why people start and stop smoking

BY CYNTHIA BILLHARTZ GREGORIAN cbillhartz@post-dispatch.com 314-340-8114 |
Posted: Thursday, September 22, 2011 12:00 am

Mike Johnston has no idea what he was thinking when he took up cigarettes at age 15

"I was definitely more impulsive back then than I am now," said Johnston, 39, of Oakville, as he puffed away on a downtown sidewalk during a work break. "I was young and had no responsibilities. Now I have a wife and two kids."

Charlie Condor, 49, of St. John, was smoking with co-workers when he admitted that his lifestyle and woeful views about life might have played a role in his decision to start smoking 28 years ago.

"Just kid stuff, you know? I was coming up through adulthood and it seemed like life was against me," he said.

The way that Johnston and Condor assess their younger selves mirrors recent findings of two researchers at University of Missouri.

By analyzing data collected during a long-term study, Andrew K. Littlefield, doctoral student in psychology, and Kenneth J. Sher, professor of psychology, have found that people who smoke at age 18 have higher rates of impulsivity than non-smokers at that age. They've also found that those who quit between ages 18 and 25, show the biggest decreases in impulsivity during that time period.

The study, which began in 1987 with one group of 489 Mizzou students and has continued with several more groups, is intended to assess substance use in general, not just smoking, according to Littlefield.

Among other things, subjects are asked to rate how well two statements describe their behaviors on a scale of one to 10. The statements pertain to whether they tend to think through facts, details and consequences before deciding to do something and whether they tend to worry a lot.

They are surveyed seven times — once a year during college then at about age 25, 29 and 35.

"We see the biggest changes in impulsivity and neuroticism between age 18 and 25," Littlefield said. "After age 30, most personality traits are usually set in plaster and they're not changing much."

Changes in people ages 18 to 25 begin happening when they leave their families, go to college, enter the workforce, get married and have children. Logic would dictate that becoming less impulsive and neurotic are a part of maturing, which causes many smokers to quit.

But Littlefield and other scientists aren't ready to draw that conclusion yet.

Quitting smoking might be prompting the changes in personality traits, he said. He stressed, however, that he means personality changes over a long time frame, not short-term ones like nervousness and lower self-regulation that come from nicotine withdrawals.

Littlefield and Sher have also concluded that, by the time a person is 35, smoking is usually no longer related to neuroticism and impulsivity.

"Now, it's moving from those traits to addiction and compulsivity, which is when your behaviors are patterns," Littlefield said. "You're on autopilot, lighting up without thinking when you get out of bed or on the way to work."

He believes the findings of his study could be useful in figuring out ways to help people quit smoking before it becomes addictive and compulsive.

Studies have shown, he said, that "there are residual effects when you follow up with students after they've taken a money management course. You find that many of them reduce drinking and either quit or reduce smoking. They not only spend less, but they reduce behaviors associated with high impulsivity."

He urges people to think of self-regulation as a muscle. It can become fatigued if you use it too much, or it can grow stronger when exercised.

"Likewise," he added, "if you can target internal thoughts you can make them more positive and reduce the impact of being neurotic."

Dan Beebe working on agreement to exit Big 12

By MIKE DeARMOND

Dan Beebe was working Wednesday on an agreement to leave his position as Big 12 Conference commissioner, according to two sources with knowledge of Beebe's decision.

The announcement of Beebe's departure is expected to come today.

"He's working on his exit package right now," one of the sources, who spoke directly to Beebe, told The Star on Wednesday night.

"A couple of weeks ago he told me privately that if the conference stayed together and he had to go it would be like lifting up a huge weight off his heart."

That source added that Beebe, who is an attorney, "has his best lawyer hat on now."

Beebe's job came in question earlier this week when a report out of Oklahoma said a condition for the Sooners' continued membership in the Big 12 was to have a new commissioner. His exit comes as the conference decides how to move forward with nine teams next season after losing a member for the third time in 15 months.

One of the things that contributed to Beebe's decision to leave, according to the source, was how he was perceived by some as being too willing to do the bidding of the University of Texas.

"Up in your neck of the woods," said the source, "he is considered a puppet for Texas."

The problem, said the source, who is based in Texas, is that "nobody down here thinks that there is anybody in the Big 12 but Texas and Oklahoma.

"Six hundred miles of difference is an amazing distance. And they both are wrong."

The source said that MU chancellor Brady Deaton, who is chairman of the Big 12's Board of Directors, was resisting Beebe's decision to step down.

But the source said Beebe decided this move would be in the best interest of the Big 12, "that they need a fresh start in the conference and not to go back to Groundhog Day where they were having this same conversation next year."

It was not known who will become interim commissioner.

Beebe joined the Big 12 in 2003 as an associate commissioner and became commissioner in 2007. He had been commissioner of the Ohio Valley Conference for the previous 14 years and formerly worked in the NCAA's enforcement division.

Last November, Beebe received a three-year contract extension and was lauded for his role in keeping the Big 12 alive after Nebraska left for the Big Ten and Colorado for the Pac-12.

Now, the Big 12 is poised to lose another member, Texas A&M to the Southeastern Conference, after this school year.

The Big 12 Board of Directors is expected to meet on a conference call today and resume expansion talks, which paused nearly three weeks ago when Oklahoma president David Boren said there was a possibility the Sooners could leave the conference.

At that time, the Big 12 was close to extending an invitation to Brigham Young. In addition to BYU, Big East schools Louisville and West Virginia could also be in the Big 12's sights.

"We're still focused on keeping the Big 12 together and stable," Kansas chancellor Bernadette Gray-Little said after a Board of Regents meeting in Topeka on Wednesday. "That is our continued aspiration. That is the ideal outcome for us."

The prospect of that outcome grew stronger late Tuesday when the Pac-12 announced it was no longer considering expanding. Oklahoma, Oklahoma State, Texas and Texas Tech were considered candidates to head west, which would have crippled the Big 12.

But although the Big 12 survived this scare, the conference may not stand on firm ground yet.

Missouri football coach Gary Pinkel continued to voice concerns about the conference. In an interview on St. Louis radio station KFNS on Wednesday, Pinkel said the league needed serious repair work.

He didn't specify, but in earlier interviews he's been critical of the Longhorn Network, Texas' venture with ESPN that has upset other Big 12 schools because it contains high school football content, which is perceived as a recruiting advantage.

"We have problems in our league and we all know what most of them are," Pinkel said. "But we don't solve them."

Anxiety, frustration bedevil Big 12 fans

By RUSTIN DODD, MIKE DeARMOND and KELLIS ROBINETT

The Big 12 Conference may be on the path to survival, but angst remains.

In Lawrence, Manhattan and, to a lesser extent, Columbia, frustrated boosters, fans and alumni are troubled because their schools' fates seem dependent on what bigger programs decide.

And while the conference may have avoided extinction for the second time in 15 months, there's no reason to think this is over.

"It's too much about money now," said Tanner Pieschl, a manager at a custom T-shirt shop in Manhattan. "A few people are upset about Texas having a network when others don't, so we're all going to change conferences? I don't get it. No fans want this.

"It's all Oklahoma and Texas. We're just here floating to whatever conference we get put into. That's disappointing. ... We have a lot to offer, but it seems like we have no say."

Indeed, it was the Texas schools that caused this latest round of Big 12 uncertainty. Texas A&M withdrew from the conference earlier this month, upset at rival Texas' \$247 million cable television deal with ESPN that does not have to be shared with other conference members. The Longhorn Network also caused a stir when officials said it would show live high school football games, a move construed to be a recruiting advantage for Texas and later rejected by the Big 12.

A&M departed anyway, leaving the Big 12 with nine teams for the following season, and the conference's future got more bleak when reports indicated Texas, Oklahoma, Oklahoma State and Texas Tech considered a move to the Pac-12 that would drop the Big 12's membership to five.

That move was stopped Tuesday night with the Pac-12's decision not to expand, but questions about the Big 12's future remain. Missouri could still have an informal offer from the Southeastern Conference.

And if the league's remaining members can't settle their differences, Kansas City stands to lose a marquee event for the Sprint Center — the Big 12 men's basketball tournament in March — and a major conference rooted in the Midwest.

Fans not only feel left in the dark, but also as though their opinions don't matter. Even as most prefer the Big 12 as is, school presidents still explore options in other leagues, some of which would require travel across time zones and breaking up traditional rivalries, such as Missouri-Kansas or Texas-Oklahoma. But other conferences have the potential allure of more stability, prestige and most importantly, money.

A survey of 300 college graduates within each of the Big 12 states of Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Kansas and Iowa conducted last week by KRC Research found a majority supported existing conference alignments. Only 19 percent said the commercialization of college sports is inevitable and should be accepted while 77 percent said schools should "fight to preserve the original intent of collegiate athletics as part of the student experience."

Only 37 percent of respondents said the current discussions regarding conference affiliation have been "honorable and transparent."

"Our conference, no matter how many teams are in it, should be strong enough to cover this part of the country," said Dave Wurth, a lifelong KU fan who lives in Raytown.

K-State

For Jed Mosher and Phil Kuehl, talking Kansas State sports is part of the job. Together, they run the Aggieville Barber Shop in Manhattan, and list football coach Bill Snyder and athletic director John Currie as regular customers.

So when someone walks in and asks if conference realignment has been discussed much in the past few days, Mosher and Kuehl can't help but chuckle.

"It's almost gotten to the point where you get tired of reading about it," Mosher said. "You can't get into your doggone car on a Friday night and drive to an away game at Syracuse or West Virginia or wherever the (heck) we end up. That would be bad for students and fans. You keep the Big 12 together and you can drive to a game on any weekend against a rival and drive home that night. Why would you want to change that?"

Now that it appears the Big 12 will survive, fans are more upbeat about the future. K-State can continue playing its natural rivals instead of merging with a group of teams left behind from the Big East, which has lost two teams in this latest realignment shuffle.

But who's to say this uncertainty won't happen again next year?

"Nobody wants that," Mosher said. "I'd love to see Texas A&M swallow their pride and say, 'OK, we'll stay in the Big 12.' They're just jealous of Texas."

Kansas

On the other side of the country, in California, prominent Kansas booster Dana Anderson is sorting through the same concerns from last summer.

He's spent the last few years trying to jumpstart KU's football program — that's his name on the three-year-old, \$31 million Anderson Family Football Complex — and the idea that Kansas could end up in a lesser conference is a distressing thought.

"We need to be in a BCS conference for football, obviously," Anderson said.

For Anderson, no BCS conference means less television revenue and a negative effect on a football program that's already struggled the last three seasons.

Other influential boosters are concerned as well. David Booth has donated millions over the years to Kansas, and his name hangs on the Booth Family Hall of Athletics in front of Allen Fieldhouse.

"I'm just like everybody else," Booth said. "Whatever is going to happen, I just wish it would happen soon."

Booth, like Anderson, said he's confident in KU's leadership. But as a resident of Texas, he's fully aware that athletic director Sheahon Zenger and other Kansas officials can do only so much.

"I don't think other conferences will decide to invite Kansas based on how well they like Sheahon," Booth said. "If they're interested in KU, they could have almost anybody there and ... as long as they can answer the phone."

Wurth and his wife, Shirley, have had season tickets to KU football games since 1957, when the conference was called the Big Seven. He hopes that phone call comes soon. And in a perfect world, it would be the call to confirm that the Big 12 — in some form — has avoided extinction for good.

"I really trust Sheahon Zenger," Wurth said, "but now it's time to see what he can do."

Missouri

At Missouri, fans are either staunchly confident in the future or won't even begin to claim they know anything about what will transpire.

"I just don't (blinking) know," said Dennis Lynch, an MU fan who not only attends games but also practices, scrimmages and football coach Gary Pinkel's "Tiger Talk" radio show broadcast on Monday night in Columbia.

"But I found out to only worry about the things that you have control over. We have no control over this."

Then there's Drew Carver, a Missouri booster in Phoenix who's married to the daughter of Dan Devine, the late and great Missouri football coach of the 1960s.

“We’re going major,” Carver said. “This is my prediction. SEC all the way, baby!”

The Star reported Tuesday that Missouri has an informal offer to join the Southeastern Conference, pending the outcome of the Big 12. The SEC and Missouri, of course, denied an offer had been made. But Carver and other MU fans point out that the SEC and Texas A&M made similar statements before the Aggies were formally accepted by the conference.

“It’s frustrating for fans,” Carver said. “You hear different rumors every day.

“But I think they’ve got the president (interim MU systems president Steve Owens) working on it ... who is a pretty sharp cookie.”

The Missouri Board of Curators and Big 12 Board of Directors, of which MU chancellor Brady Deaton is the chairman, meet today and could shed more light on the league’s future.

Not all fans are rooting for Missouri to depart the Big 12. One of them is Gene Gervino, the father of Chris Gervino, who among other things is the host of the weekly MU football highlights show.

“It’s a good league,” Gene Gervino. “The history of the rivalries, for instance against Kansas and Mizzou and Oklahoma and Texas, it’s still better if they can keep that together.

“And it is driving me crazy.”



Startup uses autistic adults to test software

MU MENTION PAGE 2

HIGHLAND PARK, Illinois – The software testers at Aspiritech are a collection of characters. Katie Levin talks nonstop. Brian Tozzo hates driving. Jamie Specht is bothered by bright lights, vacuum cleaners and the feel of carpeting against her skin. Rider Hallenstein draws cartoons of himself as a DeLorean sports car. Rick Alexander finds it unnerving to sit near other people.

This is the unusual workforce of a U.S. startup that specializes in finding software bugs by harnessing the talents of young adults with autism.

Traits that make great software testers — intense focus, comfort with repetition, memory for detail — also happen to be characteristics of autism. People with Asperger's syndrome, a mild form of autism, have normal to high intelligence and often are highly skilled with computers.

Aspiritech, a nonprofit in Highland Park, Illinois, nurtures these skills while forgiving the quirks that can make adults with autism unemployable: social awkwardness, poor eye contact, being easily overwhelmed. The company's name plays on the words "Asperger's," "spirit" and "technology."

Clients, nine companies in Aspiritech's first two years, have been pleased.

"They exceeded my expectations," said Dan Tedesco of Shelton, Connecticut-based HandHold Adaptive, which took a chance on Aspiritech to test an iPhone application. "There is a pride in their product you don't usually see in this type of work."

Aspiritech was founded by Moshe and Brenda Weitzberg after their son, Oran, now 32, was fired from a job bagging groceries. Oran was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome when he was 14. He now works at Aspiritech.

"He went from failing at bagging groceries to being one of the best software testers on our team," said Brenda Weitzberg.

The Weitzbergs modeled Aspiritech on a successful Danish company called Specialisterne, or "the Specialists." Specialisterne also employs software testers with autism. Its satisfied clients include Oracle and Microsoft.

Other companies in Belgium, Japan and Israel are either hiring or training adults with autism as software testers.

This year, Aspiritech projects \$120,000 in revenue, with 60% coming from donations and 40% from clients. The Weitzbergs hope to raise the client revenue to 50% next year.

"There have been a couple of attempts in the U.S. and Aspiritech is the one that's making it," said Scott Standifer of the University of Missouri's Disability Policy and Studies office and the organizer of a national conference on adults with autism and employment.

The exact unemployment rate for adults with autism is unknown, but it's thought to be high, Standifer said.

"We don't know how many adults have autism and, because of that, we don't know their rate of unemployment," he said. "We do know from tracking adults just emerging from high school that they are having great difficulty finding jobs."

A 2009 U.S. Department of Education survey found the employment rate for young adults with autism was on par with that for deaf-and-blind young adults, and well below the rate of those with blindness alone or learning disabilities or traumatic brain injuries, Standifer said.

Since Asperger's syndrome didn't become a standard diagnosis until the early 1990s, many of Aspiritech's software testers were adults when they first learned they were on the autism spectrum. They are pioneers, the first generation of adults with Asperger's.

Katie Levin, 35, was diagnosed in her late 20s with Asperger's. As a child, she'd been labeled as mentally ill.

"Asperger's is not a mental illness," she said. "I definitely feel like I identify with the Asperger's community more than I did with the mental illness community." She tests software and runs Aspiritech's Facebook page and Twitter feed.

Rick Alexander, 24, another tester, has a degree in computer science from the Illinois Institute of Technology and completed an internship developing software for the city of Chicago.

"I have a lot of social anxiety. I don't like meeting new people," said Alexander, who was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome as a teenager. Like many of the other testers, he lives with his parents.

He'd rather be a software developer than a tester, he said. But selling himself in a job interview is "very difficult for me."

"When you're a child, the school is very concerned with you, the state is very concerned with you," Alexander said. Organizations help adults with autism, he said, but "you need to approach them and for somebody with Asperger's syndrome, it's very difficult to do the approaching."

Most research dollars have gone toward studying children with autism while adults have been neglected, said Molly Losh, an autism researcher at Northwestern University.

"Our vocational structure really isn't suited to funnel people with autism into the workforce," Losh said. Aspiritech "is a magnificent and innovative venture," she said.

Many businesses hire offshore companies to test software. Mike Mestemaker, director of engineering for Schaumburg, Ill.-based ISI Telemangement Solutions, chose Aspiritech because it offered competitive rates but was based in the United States.

"They dove right in and worked very quickly," Mestemaker said. "They were very detail-oriented people. They really got the job done."

ISI was happy with the work and has hired Aspiritech for a second project, he said.

Aspiritech provides meaningful work (pay is \$12 to \$15 an hour) in a relaxed environment where bosses never yell if you're late and nobody minds if you need to be alone for a while. What's more, the company is building social skills. The software testers, who are in their 20s and 30s, are trained to work together and they take part in organized outings: miniature golf, bowling, eating at a restaurant.

"We want to improve social skills among people who tend to be socially isolated," said Marc Lazar, Aspiritech's autism specialist. For many of them, software testing is not going to be their lifelong career, Lazar said, "but while they're here they're going to improve their job skills and they're going to learn what kind of behavior is expected on the job and they're going to have more to put on their resumes."