

College Student's Perceptions of Living and Learning with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

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How does the K-12 special education system prepare children with ADHD for the rigors and independent learning of higher education? This article examines the K-12 experiences, including special education, of three college students diagnosed with ADHD during their early elementary years. In their own words, they provide insight into what benefitted them and what educators can do to prepare children with ADHD to have a successful post secondary experience.

Keywords: ADHD, higher education, strategies, insights

For many years, it was believed that the characteristics and symptoms of ADHD would abate as a child grew, matured, and reached adulthood. ADHD is a life-span disorder. It does not go away; it simply evolves as one grows older (Kolberg & Nadeau, 2002). Practitioners are increasingly noting adults who exhibit debilitating inattention but are not hyperactive (Kolberg & Nadeau, 2002; Resnick, 2000).

Typically, children diagnosed with ADHD have problems following through on instructions and paying attention appropriately to what they need to attend to. They also appear to not listen, are disorganized, have poor handwriting, miss details, have trouble starting tasks or have trouble with tasks that require planning or long-term effort, appear to be easily

distracted, and/or are forgetful. In addition, some children diagnosed with ADHD can be fidgety, verbally impulsive, unable to take turns, and act on impulse regardless of consequences. Additionally, because of the ability of a child diagnosed with ADHD to over focus on something that is of great interest or highly stimulating, many assume that this ability to concentrate negates the possibility of ADHD, especially when they see children able to pay attention while working one-on-one with someone, doing something they enjoy, or sitting and playing an electronic game or watching TV for hours on end. According to Goldstein (in Kolberg & Nadeau, 2002), ADHD is a condition affecting individuals differently, but consistently, throughout their life spans.

According to a Mayo Clinic study, children between 5 and 19 have at least a 7.5% chance of being diagnosed with ADHD, which amounts to nearly 5 million children and adolescents (Szegedy-Maszak, 2004). Some estimates place the number as high as 20% (Resnick, 2000). This is not a condition that fades away with maturity or increased mental capacity. There is a consensus that the core symptoms of ADHD affect a significant minority of the adult population as well (Kolberg & Nadeau, 2002). Although it is assumed that between 60-75% of children diagnosed with ADHD will carry the diagnosis with them into adulthood, the prevalence of adult ADHD cannot be easily measured. Adult ADHD is clearly a hidden disorder. For the many who have been diagnosed appropriately, there are likely many more whose attention problems and their consequences are not being addressed (Resnick, 2000).

Little has been written from the perspective of a person living with ADHD every day of their lives. Barkley (1998) pointed out that there are few studies of adult populations with ADHD, and more research is needed to fill in the gap of what happens to students diagnosed with ADHD once they leave the protective womb and structure of the educational setting. Lehmann, Davies, and Laurin (2000) noted the importance of listening to student voices in a postsecondary educational setting; however, the students with disabilities they selected had a wide variety of disabilities including hearing impairment, deafness, low vision, blindness, learning disabilities, traumatic brain injury, cerebral palsy, paraplegia, and quadriplegia. Fairweather and Shaver (1990) and Schnoes et al (2006) found that many students with disabilities fail to successfully compete academically or simply vanish from college rolls within the first two years of enrollment

in a postsecondary institution. This study focuses on students diagnosed with ADHD who had successful postsecondary education experiences.

Purpose of the Study

This phenomenological study focused on educational experiences of three young adult students, diagnosed with ADHD, who were attending a mid-sized state university located in the upper Midwest. Two of the students, Mark and Katie, had been diagnosed with ADHD during their elementary education years, whereas the third student, Jenny, was not diagnosed until her freshman year of college. Specifically, this research addressed the following four questions:

1. What has the K-12 educational experience been like from the perception of a postsecondary student diagnosed with ADHD?
2. What are the skills, abilities, and attributes a postsecondary student diagnosed with ADHD views as valuable and worthwhile for a successful college career?
3. How can the postsecondary educational experience be strengthened and improved to insure greater success of students diagnosed with ADHD?
4. What lessons can be learned from the voices of students diagnosed with ADHD for teacher preparation programs?

Methods

As mentioned, children and adults with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) experience difficulties in academic endeavors. While the literature is complete about this information, there is limited research on adults with ADHD seeking postsecondary education. In this study the method of data collection was three

intensive interviews. The interview format was open-ended consisting of intentionally broad questions used to evoke broad responses and allow an opportunity for each participant to expand on responses to provide more detailed information. However, there were also opportunities for spontaneous probing through follow-up questions after participants responded to the broad, pre-determined interview questions.

Each participant was interviewed three times. The first interview consisted of general questions regarding a student's diagnosis and initial response to the label of ADHD. During this first interview, the participants were asked to describe their educational experiences from preschool through sixth grade. Included in this first interview were inquiries about their favorite and least favorite teachers and memories of involvement in the educational planning meetings and other aspects of their special education programs (if applicable) during their early childhood and elementary school years. The focus of the second and third interviews was the participants telling their stories of living with ADHD.

Transcripts of interviews were read and a copy of each transcript was sent, as an email attachment, to the participant interviewed in the transcript for their review and approval. Once an interview was read to clarify key phrases and statements, the accompanying code was written on a separate index card along with a numerical identifier to assist in locating the key phrase later in the reams of interview data. Further examination of the data and coding allowed for categories to be compressed, combined, and collapsed into two final categories: (a) skills, abilities, and attributes for a successful college career; and (b) valuable

and worthwhile for a successful college career.

The university attended by study participants is a small Midwest university. The mission of the Disability resource center is to assist students and faculty in providing reasonable accommodations for enrolled or admitted students who have documented disabilities under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Specifically, the purpose of the Disability Resource Center is to work closely with faculty and staff in an advisory capacity, assist in the development of reasonable accommodations for students, and provide equal access for "otherwise qualified" individuals with disabilities.

Results

Table 1 contains the results of the K-12 educational experiences from perceptions of three postsecondary students diagnosed with ADHD. As indicated in table 1, supervision and reinforcement of family members and school personnel played an important role in the educational success of students involved in this study. Mark and Katie found guidance and encouragement of parents and school personnel critical to developing social and academic skills, as well as developing confidence necessary to succeeding in a postsecondary educational setting. Jenny's lack of diagnosis during her K-12 experiences excluded her from special education services. Whether through parents requesting specific teachers, homework and assignment support from home and/or school personnel, or collaboration during the formation and review of an IEP, students in this study diagnosed with ADHD found strength and fortitude through their supportive environments. Conversely, when support

from school personnel was absent because of a lack of appropriate diagnosis, Jenny found herself floundering, feeling abandoned, and slipping into the submissive role of the shy and quiet student. In a high school environment where teachers could be increasingly resistant to providing appropriate accommodations, Mark needed to rely on the expertise and advocacy of his parents and special education teachers to negotiate for accommodations required to support his continued success in secondary education studies and coursework. While Katie admitted to benefitting from assistance and support from home and school, she believed that parents and school personnel must strike a delicate balance between assisting the student with schoolwork and handing over the responsibilities to build independence and confidence.

Skills, Abilities, and Attributes for a Successful College Career

Table 2 report the results from the choices students made for a successful K-12 educational experience that would carry on into their postsecondary educational experience. Although there was no specified “resource room” at his university, Mark discovered the benefit of seeking out study environments similar to resource rooms he had utilized in high school, that were quiet, had minimum distractions, and he could return to often as a routinized study setting. Discovering the benefit of advocating for reasonable accommodations from observing their parents and K-12 special education teachers, Mark and Katie assumed the role of self-advocacy by approaching the university’s Disability Support Office and peer tutoring system. Once she secured an appropriate diagnosis lacking in her K-12 educational experience, Jenny also discovered the power of self-advocacy by asking persistent questions of

clarification with professors, seeking out peers for cooperative exam preparation, and also utilizing peer tutoring and accommodations available through the Disability Support Office. All three young adults relied on lessons learned in high school regarding regular attendance of classes, completing homework prior to all classes, and sitting in the front of the room to minimize distractions. They also utilized established metacognitive skills to select courses that had cooperative learning experiences, group work, and hands-on learning embedded in them.

Valuable and Worthwhile for a Successful College Career

Advisement procedures in the freshmen and sophomore years can be critical for the success of students diagnosed with ADHD. Table 3 summarizes how postsecondary experiences can be strengthened and improved to insure greater success of young adults diagnosed with ADHD. Mark suggested the value of a one-on-one personal advising session during these early years when freshman and sophomores are exploring career choices and have little experience to draw upon on the procedures for registration. Professors and course instructors need not only be responsible for delivering course content in an efficient and accurate manner, but a professional classroom environment should be maintained as well. Both Katie and Jenny struggled in courses where professors did not read their disability statements and used humiliation and sarcasm to respond to repeated questions for clarification of course content. For example, in Mark’s high school chemistry class he would leave the classroom to take exams in the resource room. In one instance the teacher berated Mark in front of the class telling him that he really didn’t have to leave but was using the

excuse of needing a quieter less distracting environment as a crutch. If a student diagnosed with ADHD does not feel welcomed and valued in a classroom environment, they are less likely to approach an instructor for assistance during office hours or after class. While peer tutors can be a valuable resource for struggling students, post-secondary institutions must be responsible for properly training and monitoring peer tutors. Katie found working with peer tutors intimidating at times and noted instances where peer tutors misrepresented the actual amount of face-to-face time they spent with Katie, while making excuses to Katie for not being able to meet. It was clear from all the participants that they wanted to be held to the same academic standards as their peers but required instructors and professors who could differentiate their instruction, were personable, and allowed for a collaborative learning environment.

Postsecondary educational experience can be strengthened and improved to insure the greater success of students diagnosed with ADHD. In 1995, when Jon Westling was provost of Boston University, he gave a speech bemoaning what he saw as outrageous accommodations given to college students who were disabled. Westling felt that poor accommodations made for students with disabilities threatened the quality of the postsecondary experience (Lewin, T. 1997, April 8).

This debate of how far postsecondary institutions should go to accommodate students with disabilities continued after Westling's speech. In the August 6, 1999, issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Wendy M. Williams and Stephen J. Ceci argued that accommodations for students with disabilities were "unfair advantages" that

"shortchange other students." Lehmann et al. (2000) reported that the lack of understanding and acceptance concerning disabilities by fellow students, staff, and faculty was cited by students with disabilities as a barrier to a successful postsecondary education. Research data from this study would suggest that these attitudes in higher education still persist. Reinforcement of family members and school personnel played an important role in the educational success of students diagnosed with ADHD. This study also suggests student's K-12 educational experience is critical in the success of their post-secondary experience.

Data analysis findings that evolved from responses related to "What lessons can be learned from the voices of students diagnosed with ADHD for teacher preparation programs?"

If providing staff development for postsecondary faculty regarding implementing adaptations and accommodations for students with disabilities is entertained, it would be beneficial for some of this training to be conducted by students with disabilities in order to help them give voice to their issues. Lehmann et al. (2000) suggested rewarding faculty who are willing to adapt instruction to address the learning needs of students.

Creating a better collaboration between secondary and postsecondary educational institutions would be beneficial to individuals diagnosed with ADHD. McGrath-Kato, Nulty, Olszewski, Doolittle, and Flannery (2006) reported that some universities in Oregon are hosting one-day Postsecondary Academies for high school juniors and seniors with disabilities and their families to familiarize them with the campus and provide a range of workshops (many led by postsecondary students with

disabilities). These Postsecondary Academies are a collaborative venture that includes local school districts, social services, and area businesses. It is suggested that students who attend these academies have a higher rate of retention and are more proactive about their education. Mark and Katie both stated that improved collaboration with postsecondary institutions at the transition meeting would have been beneficial to a successful transition.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that all identified students who qualify for special education services have a transition meeting before graduating from high school. Both Mark and Katie suggested improved collaboration with postsecondary institutions regarding this meeting. They both attended a university in their home town yet there was very little about this institution mentioned during the meeting. Mark was not even aware the university had disability services, and Katie was unaware of a special program for at risk students; therefore, she was placed in courses that were so difficult and frustrating that she withdrew from the courses. This lack of understanding could be attributed to lackluster attempts by postsecondary institutions to recruit students with disabilities.

All participants reported the need for better-trained peer tutors to work with students with disabilities. Zwart and Kallemeyn (2001) indicated that peer tutoring and mentoring can be a successful program for students with ADHD and learning disabilities. A peer-mentoring

program at the University of California, San Diego (Ellis, Gimblett, & Witztum, 1997), was used to help retain high-risk students with disabilities during their first year of transition to college. Not only should peers be knowledgeable in their area of instruction but also must be personable, patient, empathetic, and flexible. Zwart and Kallemeyn indicated that in order to bring about greater self-efficacy, peer tutors tried to help students gain success and mastery by learning advocacy skills through education about their diagnosis and through time management and study skills. This would indicate that tutors themselves needed some background understanding of the nature of ADHD and learning. Brinckerhoff (1991) pointed out that if students have found success in academics through utilization of a coaching program, this may have helped them increase their interest in college related tasks.

According to Lehmann et al. (2000), for postsecondary students with disabilities, time is limited by constraints related to their disabilities such as time scheduled for tutoring sessions and the need to reserve as much time for studying as possible. They also cited that there are fewer on-campus opportunities for students with ADHD to work compared to other students, and access to transportation is also an issue. All three young adults stated that providing financial aid for students with ADHD so they can concentrate on their studies and not a job would provide them with incentive to seek higher degrees, encourage self-actualization, and encourage them to respect their study and tutorial time.

Table 1

Perceptions of K-12 Educational Experiences From Postsecondary Students Diagnosed With ADHD

<i>Mark</i>	<i>Jenny</i>	<i>Katie</i>	<i>All Three Young Adults</i>
Found comfort in knowing his mother would request teachers from year to year based upon his mother's knowledge of ADHD	Found it beneficial that her parents provided homework support by reading assignments to and with her, reviewing subject content before tests, and purchasing supplementary material.	Found her parents regularly attending Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings and visiting the classroom was beneficial	Found guidance and encouragement of parents and school personnel critical to developing socially, and emotionally, and encouragement to succeed in postsecondary education also helped
Found the Special Education teachers' resource room beneficial for completing assignments	Her lack of a diagnosis during her K-12 experiences excluded her from Special Education services which might have been helpful	Expressed concern that teachers must find a balance between monitoring and guiding her progress by giving her responsibility for her own actions	Found support from parents and teachers for repeated episodes of forgetting assignments and schoolwork
Relied on Special Education teacher to help negotiate accommodations needed	Felt like she was left to struggle and navigate the educational landscape on her own		Found support from parents with homework, communication with teachers, and through reassuring messages
Unconvinced that it prepared him for postsecondary independence Expressed concern that teachers must find a balance between monitoring and guiding her progress by giving her the responsibility for her own actions			

Table 2

Skills, Abilities, and Attributes Students Viewed as Valuable for a Successful College Career

<i>Mark</i>	<i>Jenny</i>	<i>Katie</i>	<i>All Three Young Adults</i>
Selecting the optimum study environment that was void of distractions	Learning to utilize services of the university Disability Support Office to get additional test time, a quiet environment for test taking, and assistance in comprehending textbooks	Securing a single dorm room where she could structure her study environment to meet her needs	Not skipping class, completing homework prior to all classes, and sitting in the front of the room
College freshman need to advocate for themselves	Utilizing the university's peer tutoring system was beneficial	Utilizing the university's peer tutoring system was beneficial	Continued to use skills they developed in K-12 experiences
Being willing to seek help from professors and peers when assignments were unclear	Having to be persistent in asking professors questions regarding assignments or course content is important	Having to be persistent in asking professors questions regarding assignments or course content is important	Finding classes that have cooperative learning experiences, group work, and hands-on learning embedded in them
Utilizing the Disability Support Office for assistance	Prepared for tests by finding a peer to quiz her much as her mother did throughout her K-12 experiences	When possible, sought out professors who had classes that include experiential and cooperative learning in them	Spend an average of three to four hours a day on course related assignments
Continued to complete homework as soon after class as possible, a skill developed in the high school resource room			

Table 3

How Postsecondary Experiences Can Be Strengthened and Improved to Insure Greater Success of Young Adults Diagnosed With ADHD

<i>Mark</i>	<i>Jenny</i>	<i>Katie</i>	<i>All Three Young Adults</i>
Good advisement for freshman and sophomore students	Professors should not make students feel “dumb” and uncomfortable when students ask teachers to repeat answers for clarification	Professors should not make students feel “dumb” and uncomfortable when students ask teachers to repeat answers for clarification	Professors need to read the disability statements given to them by students
Was given an “advisor access code” over the telephone instead of face to face without looking at schedules or checking for progress	Seek out professors that have a “little humanness” to their classes	Have properly trained peer tutors. Visiting a peer tutor can be both “intimidating” and “overwhelming” because of the very nature of the situation; one peer knowing the information and the other not knowing the information	Professors need to take the time to understand students diagnosed with ADHD
Successful learning experiences with professors who made personal connections, fostered a sense of community through cooperative learning	Professors need to provide a fair and equal opportunity for all students to succeed	Improved collaboration with postsecondary institutions at the transition meeting	Professors need to hold students accountable by taking attendance and going over homework assignments in class
Improved collaboration with postsecondary institutions at the transition meeting		Education about “at risk” students at the transition meeting	Professors need to make an effort to know students’ names
			Trained peer-mentors available Provide financial aid for students with ADHD

Table 4

Data analysis findings that evolved from responses related to "What lessons can be learned from the voices of students diagnosed with ADHD for teacher preparation programs?"

Provide staff development for postsecondary faculty regarding implementing adaptations and accommodations for students with disabilities.

Creating a better collaboration between secondary and postsecondary educational institutions would be beneficial to individuals diagnosed with ADHD.

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) requires that all identified students who qualify for special education services have a transition meeting before graduating from high school.

All participants reported the need for better trained peer tutors to work with students with disabilities.

Providing financial aid for students with ADHD so they can concentrate on their studies and not a job.

Faculty advisement is an issue for students with ADHD

Faculty advisement is of concern for all students in higher education, but becomes more of an issue for students with ADHD who respond best to individualized attention and may need extra time to ask questions and process the information specific to each major. During the freshman year, advising could be administered from a disability office and faculty advisors who are better trained and able to work with students with ADHD and other learning disabilities could be recruited to advise disabled students. Lehmann et al.(2000), McGrath-Kato et al. (2006), and the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1994) stressed the need for students with disabilities to become more proactive and learn to "take charge" of their educational experience. Advisors should require students to prepare a schedule and list of questions before coming to advisement meetings, and advisors should take extra time to have students reiterate program requirements to their advisor. The goal of advisement should be encouraging a proactive stance from all students, being available as a guide, and directing inquiries to the appropriate sources when the answers are unknown (as opposed to saying, "Just go on the web and look it

up."). Tasks such as navigating an unknown web site to seek specific information, phone numbers, or professional program data can appear daunting and discouraging to a student with ADHD. Mark was given an "advisor access code" over the telephone instead of face to face and without looking at schedules or checking for progress. Mark also stated that his most successful learning experiences were with professors who made personal connections, and fostered a sense of community through face to face advisement sessions.

Discussion and Recommendations

Teacher preparation programs should emphasize ways to help students with ADHD to develop metacognitive and self-actualization skills. Participants in this study reported the importance of teachers understanding how they (ADHD students) think and learn and process information. The sooner students with ADHD understand their own unique learning style and needs, the sooner they can begin to take responsibility for their educational needs. According to Long and Bowen (1995), actively including students in planning to meet their educational needs will foster a sense of ownership and responsibility that

will increase their potential for academic success.

Future educators should be exposed to developmentally appropriate educational practices and be encouraged to teach with an open-minded approach focusing on student learning and not student compliance to inappropriate practices. Ruschko (1996) stated that the traditional classroom requires of the student with ADHD everything that he or she is not good at: sitting still and not talking, concentrating on skills work, and not acting or speaking impulsively.

Group work, collaborative ventures, and the building of a community of learners should be emphasized as critical accommodations necessary for the success of all learners. Katie and Jen emphasized how working in small groups not only made it easier to participate but also helped them make new friends when they moved from one school district to another. Working in groups helped Mark take responsibility and be accountable to his peers as well as the teacher. Study participants felt more successful with teachers who were willing to take the time to personally recognize

them. These teachers affirmed the participants not only as valuable members of the classroom but as viable, intelligent, capable people.

This study was limited in scope by its small pool of participants whose severity of ADHD was considered mild to moderate. Yet the strength of this study is twofold: the view from the inside of someone living with a diagnosis of ADHD and the depth of the data allowing us to get a look back at over 12 years of educational experiences. All too often the one left out of a debate and discussion about a disability is the person living with the diagnosis, who can be viewed as a victim that needs to be cured of his or her affliction.

Further phenomenological research should be done to give voice to the children and adolescents living with a diagnosis of ADHD. The more we include them in the discussion and debate, the sooner we can set them on the path of independence and self-actualization where *they* can make informed decisions about school, family, and life events.

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