

IMPROVING ACADEMIC SUCCESS AMONG COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS
WITH ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER



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IMPROVING ACADEMIC SUCCESS AMONG COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS
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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Ann Krebs Byrne

Participating in the job market today often requires some amount of post-secondary education. Some adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) understand this, and in the past thirty years more students with ADHD attended college. Relatively few community college students with ADHD went on to graduate. In addition to the typical challenges facing community college students, those with ADHD had the additional challenges of organization, time management, and the inability to focus for extended periods of time. Researchers discovered when these students had a high level of motivation and self-confidence, along with good study and time management skills, they were more likely to succeed academically and achieve their goal of graduating from college. This research review looks at various factors that can improve the academic success of community college students with ADHD.

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Chapter One: Introduction

According to Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2013), since the Great Recession in 2009, from the loss of almost 6.1 million jobs, employment has been steadily coming back and by 2020 it is predicted there will be 165 million jobs available in the U.S. market. However, a college education is becoming more important in order to participate in this job market. Many of these new jobs will require higher skills not obtainable from a high school education alone. By 2020 it is predicted 65% of all jobs in the U.S will require a minimum of a post-secondary certificate or two-year degree (Carnevale et al., 2013). Adults with disabilities – including those with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) – have been attending college at increasing rates since the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) became law in 1990. However, according to Conner (2012), while 30% of students with ADHD attended community college, only 28% of those went on to graduate. Fortunately, there is research on the challenges facing community college students and adults with ADHD. There is also helpful research pointing to what improved academic success among college students in general. This study includes an evaluation of the body of existing research with the purpose of understanding what leads to improving the academic success for community college students with ADHD.

Background

Community college students had several challenges to overcome just to graduate from college. According to Martin, Galentino, and Townsend (2014), some community college students faced outside challenges the typical four-year college student didn't usually see. These challenges were related to lower socioeconomic status, higher achievement gaps, and lack of support networks. When considering the additional challenges adults with ADHD faced, the reasons why few graduated became apparent. The research reviewed for this study highlighted

some of the factors that led to a better academic outcome for community college students with ADHD. The hope is the disability resource services offered on community college campuses could play a more active role in providing relative accommodations for these students with the goal of improving their academic success. Knowing these factors and how to apply them would also be useful for instructors to incorporate as a part of Universal Design for Instruction in their courses as well, which most likely could improve the academic success for all students involved.

Research Questions

What factors increase success among community college students with ADHD?

Specifically, do improved study skills affect course outcomes for community college students with ADHD? Does an increase in self-confidence and/or motivation improve course outcomes for community college students with ADHD?

Statement of the Problem

Community college students with ADHD need more effective support from academic staff and counselors responsible for providing disability resource services. These students also need faculty to be flexible, tolerant, and willing to help them work through their academic struggles. Without proper accommodations, counseling, and tolerance from faculty, community college students with ADHD will continue to experience low graduation rates.

Definition of Terms

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):

The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act prohibited discrimination against anyone with disabilities in many settings, including any institution that received federal funds (i.e., colleges and universities). In 2008, the ADA was amended to ensure colleges receiving federal funds must provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities that impact their ability to participate in college (Conner, 2012).

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD):

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) clinically defines the diagnostic features of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder as such:

The essential feature of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development. Inattention manifests behaviorally in ADHD as wandering off task, lacking persistence, having difficulty sustaining focus, and being disorganized and is not due to defiance or lack of comprehension.

Hyperactivity refers to excessive motor activity (such as a child running about) when it is not appropriate, or excessive fidgeting, tapping, or talkativeness. In adults, hyperactivity may manifest as extreme restlessness or wearing others out with their activity. Impulsivity refers to hasty actions that occur in the moment without forethought and that have high potential for harm to the individual (e.g., darting into the street without looking). Impulsivity may reflect a desire for immediate rewards or an inability to delay gratification. Impulsive behaviors may manifest as social intrusiveness (e.g., interrupting others excessively) and/or as making important decisions without consideration of long-term consequences (e.g., taking a job without adequate information). (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 61)

Disability Resource Services (DRS):

For purposes of this paper, this term will be used to refer to a department within a college or university that provides an academic accommodation plan to students with documented disabilities (Cory, 2011).

Learning Disability (LD):

This diagnosis might be made when persistent difficulties in reading, writing, arithmetic, or mathematical reasoning skills during formal years of schooling are noted. Symptoms may include inaccurate or slow and effortful reading, poor written expression that lacks clarity, difficulties remembering number facts, or inaccurate mathematical reasoning.

Current academic skills are well below the average range of scores in culturally and linguistically appropriate tests of reading, writing, or mathematics. The individual's difficulties are not better explained by developmental, neurological, sensory (vision or hearing), or motor disorders and must significantly interfere with academic achievement, occupational performance, or activities of daily living in order for the diagnosis of a learning disability to be applied (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Universal Design for Instruction/Learning (UDI/L):

The Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University has defined UDI/L as the design of products and environments to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible (The Center for Universal Design, 2008). When principles of UDI/L are applied to the physical environment, adaptations benefit a broad range of users and are ideally built-in rather than added on as an afterthought (Scott, McGuire, & Shaw, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the most effective strategies for helping college students with ADHD increase their academic success in community colleges. An investigation was completed regarding whether improved study skills raised the graduation rates among community college students with ADHD. Additionally, an examination of research was made to

determine if there was a relationship between confidence and motivation and improved graduation rates among community college students with ADHD.

Significance of the Study

By identifying and understanding the factors that lead to improved academic success among community college students with ADHD, accommodations and programs can be developed to address the low graduation rates for this population of students. More effective accommodations will reduce dropout rates and positively affect the economic impact for both students and the academic institution. It will also lead to an increase in an educated workforce which will have a positive effect on the community, the economy, and society.

Delimitations of Research

The references for the literature review in this study were provided by the EBSCO host online search engine through the Madison Area Technical College library and the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. These searches were conducted between June 2015 and November 2016. Search terms used for EBSCO consisted of: “ADHD AND college AND success,” “ADHD AND college AND students AND success,” “ADHD AND community college,” “ADHD AND two-year college,” “ADHD AND adult AND time management,” “ADHD AND study strategies,” “ADHD AND college,” “community college AND student AND success,” “community college AND student AND goals,” and “community college AND need AND employment.”

Method of Approach

The review of the literature began with the attempt to discover specific strategies for improved academic success among community college students with ADHD. However, very little research has been done in this specific area. The approach was to review the literature focused on community college students and the challenges they faced in completing their

degrees. Next, the review of the literature focused on adults with ADHD and the challenges they faced. Finally, the review focused on factors leading to academic improvement among college students with ADHD.

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

Community College Students with ADHD

General characteristics of community college students.

According to Martin et al. (2014), students who attended community colleges had different characteristics from students who attended four-year undergraduate colleges or universities. A higher percentage of students who attended community colleges were not as prepared for the rigors of coursework, and came from a lower socioeconomic status than students who attended four-year colleges. A higher percentage of community college students were more racially diverse, with almost half of the student body being non-white, than students attending four-year colleges. Community college students were more likely to work and enroll part-time in classes. Community college students were also less likely to complete their degrees than students attending four-year colleges.

Burns (2010) found that “at a time when education beyond high school is a critical need, the national attention and pressure for community colleges to increase retention and persistence rates have grown exponentially” (p. 34). Consequently, Nielsen (2015) showed that students’ aspirations for attending college were based on the necessity of getting a good job. Martin et al. (2014) found that community college students who graduated likely had clear goals, strong motivation, and the ability to manage their external demands; and they were likely self-empowered.

Symptoms of ADHD.

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) was considered a childhood disorder, however ADHD symptoms were found in up to 85% of adults diagnosed as children (Biederman, 2011). ADHD was characterized by inattentive, and hyperactive and/or impulsive behavior,

negatively impacting academic, vocational, social, and psychological functions (Fleming & McMahon, 2012). In children, the most common symptoms of ADHD centered around inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity; whereas in adults, the main symptoms consisted of inattention, struggles to manage emotions, explosive temper, problems managing stress, and mild depression (Kessler et al., 2011). Inattention involved the inability to stay focused on a task. An example of impulsivity involved a habit of interrupting someone instead of holding onto a thought until another had finished talking (Tuckman, 2009).

College and ADHD.

Between two and eight percent of college students in the United States self-reported having ADHD (Green & Rabiner, 2012). According to D'Alessio and Banerjee (2016), symptoms of college students with ADHD differed from childhood symptoms, and were different throughout their lives. Hyperactivity in childhood sometimes led to anxiety and depression in adults. Adult-students with ADHD commonly experienced negative self-perceptions, shame, and guilt about their academic performance. These students indicated they were less confident in their pursuits of academic success than their peers. College students with ADHD experienced lower academic success and higher psychological and emotional problems than their peers.

The perception of time was an issue for students with ADHD as well. Prevatt, Proctor, Baker, Garrett and Yelland (2011), asked college students with and without ADHD to predict how long it would take them to perform a task after being trained. After the students performed the task, the researchers found that college students with ADHD had a distorted sense of time in that they indicated a task took longer to perform than it took in reality.

The number of students with Learning Disabilities (LD) and ADHD who attended college had increased as well. According to Mytkowicz and Goss (2012), college enrollment of students with either an LD or ADHD had doubled since the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). However, even though enrollment had increased, only 24% of students with ADHD completed a bachelor's degree within six years of enrollment. The implications of a failed college experience put an economic and emotional burden on these students (D'Alessio & Banerjee, 2016).

College students with ADHD were challenged in developing self-management skills because they struggled with distractions, impulse control, and making long-term goals. Many students experienced a decrease in a structured environment in college which presented a greater challenge to fulfilling the academic goals for students with ADHD (Fleming & McMahon, 2012).

Factors Affecting Academic Success among College Students with ADHD

Although specific research regarding community college students with ADHD has been limited, researchers found a number of factors had an impact on the academic success of college students with ADHD.

Study Skills.

In their study of predictors of academic success among college students with attention disorders, Kaminski, Turnock, Rosen, and Laster (2006) found that 40 percent of high-achieving college students with ADHD attributed the use of study, time management, and organizational skills to their academic success. Students with ADHD were separated into two groups – low-achieving, and high-achieving. All students filled out the Coping Resources Inventory for Stress (CRIS) questionnaire. The majority of students in the high-achieving group reported time-

management and study-skill techniques helped them maintain their academic success. Kaminski et al. recommended college counselors should advise students with ADHD in the proper use of time-management for achieving academic success.

In a study of 150 students from a large southeastern public university in the United States, Reaser, Prevatt, Petscher, and Proctor (2007) compared the study habits of college students with ADHD to those with and without learning disabilities (LDs). The strengths and weaknesses of students' study habits were measured using the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI). The students with ADHD reported poorer performance in concentration and time management than both students with LDs and those without any disabilities.

Confidence.

College students' sense of self-confidence was a contributing factor towards academic success as well. College students with ADHD were less confident about their academic success as compared to those without ADHD (Green & Rabiner, 2012). In a University of Alabama survey of 40 college students with ADHD, Wallace, Winsler, and NeSmith (1999) found that students who reported lower levels of self-confidence, also reported less academic success. From the data analysis, these researchers inferred that it was likely that students with higher reported self-confidence performed better academically. Likewise, in their study surveying academic success factors among women in college with ADHD, Hinckley and Alden (2005) found that the majority of the participants felt, "academic success is a balance of doing well and feeling good about yourself."

Motivation.

Although study-skills and self-confidence were predictors of academic success, motivation in college students with ADHD was an important factor as well. Schaffer (2013)

found that among high-achieving college students with ADHD, 70 percent indicated that proving they could succeed in college was a motivating factor for them. Kaminski et al. (2006) also found in their study that high-performing college students with ADHD were also highly motivated; they reported their source of motivation was making others proud. Interestingly, Schaffer also found that students with ADHD reported having a poor memory, being bored with their courses, and having feelings of uncertainty. These were factors that led to a decrease in motivation (Schaffer, 2013).

Social connections.

Having a good social support network also played a part in contributing to the academic success of college students with ADHD. Kaminski et al. (2006) mentioned many students relied on their friends, roommates, professors, and parents for emotional and social support to help them manage their ADHD. Schaffer (2013) found that high-achieving college students with ADHD said they relied on their friends for social support when dealing with their ADHD and over 70 percent relied on their mothers for support.

Coaching.

Coaching also had a positive effect on these students. In a study by Field, Parker, Sawilowsky, and Rolands (2013), college students who received coaching for managing their ADHD reported positive self-talk led to better time management of tasks and more effective problem solving; it also led to reduced self-doubts and less anxiety. These students indicated that coaching helped them to improve their self-regulation, namely their organizational and time management skills. These students indicated that positive self-talk was helpful and that the coaching had a positive effect on their self-confidence as well.

Interview with Disability Resource Counselor

With the understanding that a single interview is not scientific evidence, it is however useful to get the perspective of a person who worked with community college students with ADHD regarding what factors contributed to the academic success for these students. Kevin Carini (personal communication, February 17, 2017) received a Master of Science in Rehabilitation Counseling with an Emphasis in Assistive Technology, and had over 15 years of experience as a Disability Resource Counselor at Madison Area Technical College (MATC) in Madison, Wisconsin, USA. In an interview with Carini, accommodations for community college students with ADHD was discussed.

When asked what factors led to academic success and failure for these students, Carini emphasized several points. First, not all students with ADHD benefited from the same accommodations. It was important to assess, individually, what worked for these students. For some, translation of text-based lecture material into audio format worked well because these students were able to focus better when listening, whereas translating audio to text worked better for other students who focused better when reading in a quiet environment. Some students with ADHD benefited from a notetaking service, allowing the students to focus on lecture without the distraction of taking notes, going back later to review the notes taken when studying. For other students with ADHD, the act of taking their own notes helped them to stay focused on the lecture. This may affirm the assumption that students without LDs, as well as students with ADHD, have various learning preferences, therefore instructors should consider designing their courses to include elements of UDI.

Second, Carini had the greatest success with these students when faculty were open and willing to support and follow accommodation plans. When faculty had been open and

supportive to the learning challenges of students with ADHD, these students reported an increased level of motivation, a greater enjoyment of what they were learning, and students had greater success and confidence regarding their educational pursuits. When discussing what hindered students with ADHD to succeed academically, Carini pointed to a lack of time-management and a failure for these students to prioritize their academic goals. These students may have skipped classes to do other things. This behavior might have been indicative of impaired executive function and a lack of impulse control that students with ADHD struggled with (Weyandt & DuPaul, 2008).

Carini said when these students attended time-management and study-skill training, their academic successes increased. Of all the students Carini counseled among students with LDs, it was the students who had ADHD that benefited the most from time-management and study-skills training. For these students, Carini counseled them on how to use a planner and set academic goals; he also recommended college and learner success courses for these students. With the prevalence of smart-phones and electronic calendars, alarms, and to-do lists, Carini highly recommended students with ADHD use these applications. Students reported great success after using these applications.

Carini discovered, in counseling students with ADHD, that some of them had additional disorders such as anxiety and/or depression. For some of these students, this was a result of the stigmatization they experienced in primary and secondary school from other students and teachers not understanding ADHD, or their own frustration with their ADHD. Carini found students who reported having faculty who understood their ADHD significantly lowered their level of anxiety, making it easier for them to succeed academically. Carini also found that students with ADHD who regularly met with an ADHD coach in the community reported a high

level of academic success and increased sense of self-confidence. Carini's advice to students with ADHD was to use the resources that are available to them at their colleges, and always have an open dialog about their academic struggles with their instructors. The students he saw that took advantage of the resources and follow their accommodation plans were academically successful. Carini advised instructors to be flexible with their students who have ADHD in regards to the learning environment, and to incorporate UDI in their courses so the content is easier for all students to be accommodated in their learning.

Implications

Given the additional challenges facing community college students with ADHD, it is important for these students to take advantage of the disability resource services offered by the college. Services should include counseling to help students with self-confidence, and accommodations for note-taking, and recalling lecture material from their classes. Additionally, it is paramount that incoming college students with ADHD establish and maintain an adequate social network of friends and/or family that will be supportive of them. These students should take advantage of college success courses, and study and time-management skill classes to increase their self-confidence and stay motivated to graduate from college. Other factors that contributed to the success of students with ADHD were coaching and mentoring opportunities. College instructors and advisors who are willing to empathize and provide coaching will make a valuable investment in the academic success of these students.

Chapter Three: Conclusions and Recommendations

It is unclear whether enough community college students with ADHD are getting the help they need to graduate. Accommodation plans were often mentioned in the research as important for college students with ADHD, however there was little testing of the effectiveness of accommodation plans (Weyandt & DuPaul, 2008). Even though research showed ADHD has a significant impact and presents a large challenge in the college setting, very little development research has been done with college students who have ADHD to determine which supports yield the best results (Fleming & McMahon, 2012).

The benefits of conducting further research could be significant if it informs the development of more effective accommodation plans for college students with ADHD. There would be economic benefits to community colleges and taxpayers knowing the money being spent on accommodation plans for students is more effective. There would also be economic benefits to communities and employers since the number of skilled, qualified job candidates would be greater. Of course, the student with ADHD benefits as well because they would now be more equipped to compete in the workforce.

Accommodation plans alone may be adequate for many college students with LDs, however students with ADHD could benefit from greater accountability and mentoring with their coursework. Individuals with ADHD suffer from impaired executive function and impulse control (Weyandt & DuPaul, 2008). By adding coaching/mentoring, time-management & study-skills training, and accountability groups as additional accommodations, students with ADHD might be afforded the tools they need to complete their college degrees.

Many studies up to the time of this review involving college students with ADHD have not shown much significance due to the low sample sizes and have been more qualitative than

quantitative. There is a need for a longitudinal study involving multiple large community colleges across the United States. Ideally, the study would compare the effect of different accommodations on the academic success of college students with ADHD. A standard set of accommodations including study-skill and time-management training could be used in both a control and treatment group. The treatment group could add a coaching/mentoring and accountability component. The outcome of a study like this could lead to more effective accommodation plans for college students with ADHD. Another study to design could involve a similar sample measuring the effect of improved motivation on academic success. The treatment group could include group or individual training that helps students work through exercises designed to increase their internal motivation through positive attitude training.

In addition to accommodation plans, faculty can make a significant impact in the academic success for students with ADHD. Since individuals with ADHD tend to struggle more with anxiety and self-confidence, faculty who are able to come alongside these students, and offer coaching and some flexibility with assignments can lower anxiety and increase self-confidence, which could create a higher level of motivation for these students to succeed in their classes.

Today, more students with ADHD are attending college, and they need to in order to be competitive in the workforce. According to Carini (2017), approximately 1000 students out of a student body of 37,000 took advantage of accommodations at Madison Area Technical College, and up to 50 percent of those presented with ADHD. These are just the students who felt comfortable disclosing their disabilities. It is good news that community college campuses are more inclusive of students with disabilities since before the 1990s. Since funding is available for ensuring the success of college students with disabilities, faculty, staff, and counselors in

colleges need to be accountable to taxpayers and students to provide the most effective accommodations, coaching/mentoring, and skills training to make sure all students are succeeding. By providing the most effective services to students with ADHD, disability resource specialists could support students to equitably compete academically on the same level as students without disabilities.

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