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Supporting College Students with A.D.H.D.

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Supporting College Students with A.D.H.D.

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A Capstone Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Master of Science Degree in
Professional Development at
Winona State University

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Winona State University
College of Education
Counselor Education Department

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Supporting College Students with A.D.H.D.

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Science Degree in

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Abstract

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) negatively affects individuals in many aspects of life from childhood through adulthood, via invisible yet profound ways, through deficits in executive, social, and emotional functioning. This paper gives special consideration to the unique needs, challenges, and experiences of college students with ADHD, to inform university student support staff, counselors, and other advocates of college students of best practices and resources available to the ADHD population. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the experience of college students with ADHD and to offer tools to the professionals who support them.

Particularly, this paper explains: 1) features of the disorder, 2) specific components of executive functioning and their importance, 3) social and emotional difficulties, and 4) specific supports to meet the challenges of this group of college students.

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Introduction

The importance of a college education for many types of careers has been stressed for quite some time in the United States, and it seems that this will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future. According to a report from Achieve, Inc. (2012), technological changes in the workplace, as well as changes in the global economy, have caused employers to place greater value on workers with higher levels of education. The report describes the future needs of the United States workforce by stating that in the year 2018, “63% of all jobs will require some kind of postsecondary education and training” (Achieve, 2012).

Marketplace demands for educated workers will continue to push most graduating high school students on to colleges and universities in pursuit of associates and undergraduate degrees, as well as advanced degrees. The academic workload placed upon college students can be very challenging. In particular, students with disabilities are more likely to struggle with various academic tasks than students who do not have disabilities (Pingry O'Neill, Markward & French, 2012). Students with disabilities, depending on their specific disabilities, may have more difficulty than their non-disabled peers with study skills, test-taking, comprehension, and note-taking skills, to name a few. They also may encounter instructors who are not aware of or are not willing to incorporate teaching methods that will best suit their individual educational needs (Pingry O'Neill et al., 2012).

One prominent population of students with disabilities, and the focus of this paper, is students with Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Fleming and McMahon (2012) describe the challenges faced by this group of students:

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) affects between 2 and 8% of college students. ADHD is associated with impaired academic, psychological, and social functioning, and with a wide array of negative outcomes including lower GPAs,

graduation rates, and self-reported quality of life. The college environment often brings decreased external structure and increased availability of immediate rewards, presenting added demands for behavioral self-regulation—an area in which students with ADHD are already vulnerable (p. 303).

Since students with ADHD encounter such specific impairments and environmental challenges found in the collegiate setting, and postsecondary education is so vital for success in many fields of the United States workforce, it is important for university support staff and other professionals who work with college students to utilize the best practices and interventions for supporting this population as these students work towards a successful career. Without proper supports, navigating the requirements of a degree program can be an especially difficult task for a student with ADHD. Colleges, support staff, mental health professionals, and students with ADHD should have knowledge of the challenges ADHD poses as well as specific strategies that are proven to help students be successful.

Review of Literature

To appropriately address the concerns of students with ADHD and discuss the ways in which advocates can best support this population, it's important to have a clear definition and understanding of the disorder.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; *DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013) states: “The essential feature of ADHD is a persistent pattern of inattention and / or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development.” Inattention includes behaviors such as falling off task, an inability to remain persistent, trouble with focus, and a lack of organization which cannot be attributed to intentional

defiance or a lack of comprehension (APA, 2013). Hyperactivity involves many types of movement activities at inappropriate times including “excessive fidgeting, tapping, or talking” while in adults it manifests as “extreme restlessness or wearing others out with their activity” (APA, 2013). The feature of impulsivity has to do with actions that are carried out in the spur of the moment without planning which may be potentially harmful, possibly as a method of obtaining an immediate reward of some kind or due to an inability to wait for an outcome (APA, 2013). Impulsivity means more than sudden physical movement. Other types of impulsivity include “social intrusiveness such as interrupting others excessively, or making important decisions without consideration of long-term consequences” (APA, 2013).

In order to properly diagnose ADHD, it is important that several symptoms are able to be confirmed as occurring before the age of 12 since ADHD begins in childhood (APA, 2013). It is important to try to confirm symptoms from multiple sources, especially if the individual has reached adulthood because it is unreliable to depend on the memory of one source after so much time has passed (APA, 2013).

Another requirement for proper diagnosis is the observation of symptoms across multiple settings, such as home, school, and work, which also necessitates the consultation of multiple sources who can confirm that behaviors take place in more than one setting (APA, 2013). Some settings which are more novel, interesting, or engaging may make the recognition of ADHD symptoms more difficult, which should be taken into consideration (APA, 2013).

While college students with ADHD tend to possess greater capabilities in the areas of cognition and compensation for the deficits they face compared to their peers with ADHD who do not attend college, their performance in the college environment is more likely to be less successful than their non-ADHD peers (Fleming & McMahon, 2012). College students with

ADHD “tend to have lower grade point averages (GPA), higher rates of academic probation and dropout, and poorer functioning across several domains” (Fleming & McMahon, 2012, p. 304).

Executive Functioning

According to Kutscher (2008) ADHD should be thought of in terms of its effect on executive function. Parker, Hoffman, Sawilowsky, and Rolands (2001) refer to executive function as an all-encompassing term used to describe the components of self-regulation that drive organization, planning, and execution, as well as other cognitive activities and emotional responses. Rickel and Brown (2007) describe executive function as “a term used to describe a spectrum of the brain’s control processes that integrate, focus, activate, and prioritize other neurological functions” and add that “external demands on executive function increase as humans develop, and become more complex and important as maturity continues.”

Adolescents who continue on to college certainly experience an immediate increase in external demands on executive function as many aspects of their former lives as high school students change or disappear altogether. Class schedules are more variable and completely up to the student to manage, professors do not check in with individuals on coursework progress, and parents are not called if there are attendance issues or other problems with performance. “This environmental shift poses a double dilemma. Students with ADHD lose the structure provided by the secondary school schedule, but they are also further removed from people who have helped them manage their innate difficulties with self-regulation” (Buchanan, 2011, p. 195). Many will live away from their families for the first time, becoming completely responsible for their morning and nighttime routines, and sleep hygiene in general. These new tasks, which require greater effort to manage, clash with the influx of opportunities for immediate rewards as Fleming and McMahon (2012) point out, such as increased socialization, college-sponsored activities and

events, parties, and general downtime activities. Select areas of executive function, which are of particular importance to college students, will now be examined.

Inhibition. Unlike animals, which act and react solely on instinct, humans have the ability to regulate their behavior by acting according to plans in order to achieve the best outcomes for the future (Kutscher, 2008). Inhibition is described by Kutscher (2008) as the key executive function due to its ability to “put the brakes on your behavior” (p. 16); allowing you to successfully execute pre-formed plans by avoiding distractions and staying on course. By utilizing the function of inhibition, an individual is afforded time to consider options before reacting. Individuals with ADHD will struggle with this executive function by lacking the ability to avoid distractions, instant reactions, or physically acting on things in the environment, which are representative of the three hallmark signs of ADHD, respectively: inattentiveness, impulsiveness, and hyperactivity (Kutscher, 2008).

Initiation. This executive function is the act of beginning a task. For a college student tasked with reading assignments, papers to write, and other general homework, initiation can be a challenging obstacle to overcome (Kutscher, 2008). This is related to procrastination which can take the form of all sorts of activities that prevent the start of academic work, ranging from things that are related to academic function such as sharpening a pencil, or attending to some lesser matter for another class, to things that are simply more interesting such as watching some type of video programming or searching for new music to listen to (Kutscher, 2008). Again, the inability to inhibit other choices and distractions is a real struggle for a college student with ADHD.

Working memory. Kutscher (2008) describes working memory as the act of keeping multiple ideas operational in the mind at a single time. To reflect on past mistakes in order to

make an appropriate adjustment in the present situation, the lesson from the past and the current moment must be considered at the same time, and ideally the reason for achieving a good outcome, the future goal, should also be present in the immediate mind (Kutscher, 2008). An example that illustrates the difficulty of this executive function for the college student with ADHD is remembering the end-goal of graduating from college with good grades, for the purpose of landing a stable and rewarding career, while fighting the present-moment distractions of a stimulating event or activity. The inability to inhibit a present-moment distraction can block out the ideally-prioritized future goal, which is a deficit in working memory (Kutscher, 2008).

Another deficit in the area of working memory, referred to as “adding emotion to fact” (Kutscher, 2008, p. 20), is crucial for motivation since motivation requires the use of emotion along with the activity being attempted. A salient example that demonstrates the cost of this deficit in a college student with ADHD is the memory of a past failure to meet a deadline for class without fully recalling the emotional tag that went along with that failure, which in this case is the dread, fear, or disappointment in the consequence of missing that assignment deadline (Kutscher, 2008). This is one of the reasons why a frustrating pattern of this behavior is able to continue despite the negative outcomes.

Foresight. Kutscher (2008) defines foresight as “predicting and planning for the future” (p. 19); and remarks how difficult this executive function is for an individual with ADHD who possesses an underperforming working memory in combination with a lessened ability to handle distractions in the current moment. He continues by painting a picture of people with ADHD as “prisoners of the present” (p. 19); who are unprepared for the future and often experience the most difficulty with their poor handle on the function of foresight.

Social Impairment

Fleming and McMahon (2012) claim that ADHD has been shown to negatively impact social functioning in college students. “College students with ADHD report lower social skills and social adjustment than peers matched on age, gender, and GPA, with moderate-to-large effect sizes” (Fleming & McMahon, 2012). Male students who exhibit symptoms of inattention have been associated with delayed formation of romantic relationships, lower confidence and assertiveness in scenarios with females, as well as poorer reviews from female peers based on 1-minute interactions (Fleming & McMahon, 2012). These are highly significant impairments at any age, but are especially detrimental during the developmental period of late adolescence when these skills are of great importance.

Females with ADHD reported making sudden hurtful comments and referred to themselves as being blunt (Fleming & McMahon, 2012). Buchanan (2011) describes students with ADHD as “less capable of monitoring and self-regulating their behavior” in social situations, tending to fixate on certain details more than is helpful. Collections of self-reported personality characteristics reveal that college students with ADHD “appear to be more confrontive and aggressive, more independent, less rule-focused, and less influenced by corrective feedback, whether positive or negative” (Fleming & McMahon, 2012, p. 305).

Students with ADHD actually held lower opinions of other individuals with ADHD compared to students without ADHD, though frequent contact with those who have ADHD led to more favorable ratings (Fleming & McMahon, 2012). College students with and without ADHD used more negative descriptors to talk about those with ADHD than positive words (Fleming & McMahon, 2012).

Emotional Impact

Adolescents and adults with ADHD experience swings in affect from highs to lows in response to life experiences as well as less conscious factors, and the changes are known to occur in a matter of minutes or hours, up to several times each day (Wender, 1995). According to Wender (1995), an individual with ADHD will often state that their mood operates like a roller coaster, with the low times described as discontentment or boredom. This is unlike an individual with major depression, as those with ADHD are still able to experience pleasure if an appropriately positive scenario or encounter comes their way (Wender, 1995). A sense of the hardship that ADHD-induced emotional lows bring upon an individual is provided by Wender (1995):

Although the ADHD patient's spontaneous depressions are generally short-lived, the ADHD patient's propensity to get himself into realistic life difficulties is constant and may produce prolonged "depressions" or demoralization. The combination of academic, vocational, and interpersonal difficulties often causes the ADHD patient to construct and fall into a deep morass from which he cannot extricate himself readily. However, such "depressions" respond well to simple supportive therapy of various kinds. (pp. 28-29)

For the individual with ADHD trying to cope with a downturn in emotions, the inhibition of working memory in "adding emotion to fact" (Kutscher, 2008, p. 20), as was mentioned earlier, serves as a disadvantage since it would be helpful for a person with ADHD to remember past feelings while changing negative emotions into positive ones with the strategies that worked, and avoiding the strategies that didn't work by remembering the negative emotional associations (Kearnes & Ruebel, 2011). Furthermore, Kearnes and Ruebel (2011) explain that an

individual with ADHD is more likely to exhibit negative affect immediately following a troubling event due to a deficit in inhibition and self-talk regulatory skills, leading to a quick, unfiltered reactionary response.

Results from the research study conducted by Kearnes and Ruebel (2011) support earlier research data ranking adults with ADHD higher on scores of emotionality. In their study, “regardless of gender, the adults with ADHD, Combined Type diagnosis rated themselves significantly higher on emotionality (ADSA Emotive) than adults receiving no diagnosis” (Kearnes & Ruebel, 2011, p. 39), meaning the ADHD participants showed greater “moodiness, tendency toward depression, and feelings of being easily overwhelmed by demands in life” (p. 39).

Useful Supports

Despite the significant challenges that an individual with ADHD will face upon their arrival to campus and throughout their time in college, there are many options available to help them achieve success. Skills that may be lacking can be introduced and worked on, and skill areas which are already sufficient or partially developed can be strengthened. The following types of support can be used in combination with each other, based on the individual needs and preferences of each student.

Disability services. Students with ADHD will likely find that connecting with their campus Disability Services office is a worthwhile step in accessing many useful resources on campus. Staff members who work in disability services are allies who are familiar with the challenges of students with a wide range of disabilities including students with ADHD. Students have many reasons to seek out this support on their campus, from having a place where they can go for referrals to other helpful offices or departments on campus, having a place to access

special resources, tools, or tips related to ADHD, or just to find an understanding campus employee to consult with.

Students are most comprehensively served by their campus Disability Services office if they submit medical documentation of their ADHD diagnosis and follow the registration process of that office which will also likely involve the completion of an application as well. Registering with the Disability Services office may make a student eligible for academic accommodations that address the academic hardships caused by ADHD.

Academic accommodations. Students with a documented disability, such as ADHD, are protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, amended in 2008 (ADA), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) (Disability Rights California [DRC], 2012). ADA and Section 504 cover virtually all colleges and universities in the United States, including those run by religious organizations, provided that those institutions receive at least some amount of federal financial assistance (DRC, 2012).

Under these laws, students with appropriately documented ADHD can receive academic accommodations from their college or university, based on review of that documentation by the institution's disabilities services office which can determine the need for a variety of academic supports such as the ability to take exams and quizzes in a quiet, low distraction environment, or to take exams and quizzes with extended time or frequent breaks (Kranke, Jackson, Taylor, Anderson-Fye, & Floersch, 2013). Other technological accommodations may be available such as textbooks provided in an audio format, or devices to aid in note-taking, based on functional impairment outlined by the medical provider in the student's documentation.

ADHD coaching. A particularly useful and very specific form of support that students with ADHD should consider if they have access to one in their area is an ADHD coaching

service (Bausch, 2005). This support is not likely to be available to every student with ADHD who could use coaching assistance, and the additional costs may be prohibitive if coaching is not provided by the school, but those with the means to obtain a coach could benefit greatly (Bausch, 2005). “More and more schools are looking to ADHD coaching as an effective way to both attract and retain students” (Bausch, 2005, pg. 2).

Once a student is assigned to an ADHD coach, the pair will meet at regular intervals whether that is every other week, or once or twice a week (Bausch, 2005). The coach will review challenging areas for the student and specifically address the areas of executive functioning that will be worked on. If a student is having trouble making it to class or any other place of importance on time, a specific plan will be put into place to improve their timeliness. An emphasis is placed on establishing useful strategies that will serve the student long into the future as life skills, not just approaches to get by in school (Bausch, 2005). A key benefit of the ADHD coaching support pointed out by Bausch (2005) is the accountability and supervision factor. Students with an ADHD coach have someone looking out for their best interest in all ways related to executive functioning skills, who will serve as an independent and non-judgmental figure to help guide them and it’s helpful that this is not a parent or teacher so there is no role confusion or conflicts (Bausch, 2005).

Findings from research conducted by Parker et al. (2011) indicated that four out of seven student participants felt “coaching changed how they formulated their goals and improved their capacity to attain them” (p. 121). These four students also indicated that they learned to reach higher with their goals, breaking apart the steps into more manageable pieces with multiple deadlines (Parker et al., 2011). Time management and motivation were also reportedly improved

in the eyes of students who claimed they benefited from their experience with an ADHD coach, though the work to accomplish these changes remained difficult (Parker et al., 2011).

Students in the Parker et al. (2011) study also reported an appreciation overall for their ADHD coaches' non-judgmental guidance, understanding, and "ability to challenge them to achieve meaningful goals" (p. 124). All of these coaching qualities and implemented changes allowed the students to recognize a growing confidence within themselves (Parker et al., 2011).

Counseling. Students that choose to seek counseling services due to their ADHD symptoms, whether it's on-campus, or through a community agency or private practice, can benefit from a variety of therapeutic approaches. Weinstein (1994) describes psychotherapy as a way to help an individual with ADHD by increasing their understanding of their diagnosis and what it means for them personally and functionally in all areas of their life. This is especially important for college students who are already at a very critical developmental stage in life, beginning the transition from late-adolescence to adulthood. ADHD is just another variable that further affects students in the "vocational, educational, social, sexual, and psychological" aspects of their life (Weinstein, 1994, p. 47).

According to Weinstein (1994), long-term therapy is an option that may potentially suit some individuals with ADHD, if there are character issues present which may require more work to deal with. Examples are learned defenses like obsessive behavior or hyper-vigilant behavior to stay on top of tasks, or avoidance and procrastination to avoid the act of making mistakes (Weinstein, 1994). These behaviors can become entrenched because they act as coping mechanisms, however maladaptive, which is why they may take a great deal of effort to change (Weinstein, 1994).

Fortunately, counseling as an overarching support can provide either long-term assistance or short-term assistance for students with ADHD. Some specific counseling supports found in the literature, which can be delivered on a more short-term basis with college students, are the formation of or modification of self-talk, resiliency training, and self-efficacy training.

Self-talk. A specific method of remaining on task and regulating changes in the course of a task is the ability to speak to one's self internally, known as self-talk. This is useful skill because it allows for logical processing and weighing of alternatives before a decision is made in light of any new information that is available, and if performed correctly a beneficial choice will be made (Kutscher, 2008). The lack of an ability to inhibit reactions in an individual with ADHD prevents them from properly developing and utilizing the self-talk executive function, which explains symptoms of impulsivity even further (Kutscher, 2008). A counselor can help educate students with ADHD on the usefulness of employing appropriate internal dialogue as a skill to be used in everyday situations, and explain why this skill may have been missing from the student's toolbox in the past, based on their disorder. Not only can the counselor help the student develop strategies for adding appropriate self-talk in decision-making scenarios, they can also help the student realize the potential that positive self-talk towards themselves has and the consequences of using negative internal language towards themselves.

Self-talk exercises and education with a counselor address the very real emotional impact that ADHD can have on an individual, including the feeling of being on an emotional rollercoaster as reported by Wender (1995). Self-talk exercises may be considered a type of simple supportive therapy mentioned by Wender (1995).

Resiliency training. Due to the emotional pain that is present among college students with disabilities, including students with ADHD, it is important to know that research on

resiliency training offers hope for students who find some situations in the college environment to be unbearable and unmanageable. Orr and Goodman (2010) discuss resiliency as the ability to overcome challenging situations, claiming that it is possible for anyone, including members of high-risk populations such as college students with disabilities, if the right provisions are available. According to Benard (2004), resiliency is bolstered by “caring relationships, high expectation messages, and opportunities for participation and contribution” (p. 43). Developing increased resiliency is an excellent way to guard against stressful situations that could derail the work of earlier successes. A counselor is an excellent resource for serving as and modeling a caring relationship, and someone who can deliver high expectation messages with sincerity.

Self-efficacy training. Another encouraging avenue mentioned in the research is the principle of self-efficacy. Research on self-efficacy, the belief in one’s ability to accomplish a task, among college students with disabilities is limited (Costello & Stone, 2012). According to Costello and Stone (2012) self-efficacy plays a role in the way people feel, think, behave, and motivate themselves. Students with low self-efficacy may tend to demonstrate avoidant behavior in areas where they have failed before and believe they may fail again (Costello & Stone, 2012). Costello and Stone (2012) discuss that some college students with disabilities do not even believe they deserve success because of their academic track record. College students with ADHD, struggling with inhibition of unhelpful behaviors, thoughts, and activities as well as other deficits in executive functioning, may find self-efficacy training to be useful in repairing their potentially damaged self-image. In combination with other forms of support and the implementation of organizational strategies, self-efficacy strengthening could work well for certain students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, all university student support staff, counselors, faculty and other advocates of college students should have an awareness of ADHD, knowledge of how it affects individuals who have it, and an awareness of the supports and best practices available for it on their respective college campuses. This paper has discussed various areas of impact that students with ADHD struggle with, detailing the deficits and challenges experienced in the areas of executive function, including inhibition, initiation, working memory, and foresight. These impacts should be known so that individual students with ADHD are not mistaken for being lazy, uncaring, or incapable and written off in the classroom or other areas of campus. Instead, caring and informed campus staff and faculty should direct students with ADHD to services and supports that address these deficits in productive ways.

Social impairment and emotional impacts were discussed in this paper to highlight the internal toll that ADHD takes on a person, not just in the classroom, but in all other areas of their life. This gives student support staff, faculty, and other advocates of college students insight into the struggles that are really faced, so that the disorder is not thought of as merely a short-term concentration issue, but a multifaceted one.

Discussing disability services and the academic accommodations that all students may be eligible for on campus, gives staff an idea of useful academic solutions which might be available should a student approach them with challenges, looking for answers. ADHD coaching, and the wide range of counseling services available which include, but are not limited to self-talk, resiliency training, and self-efficacy training, are good resources that all campus staff should have knowledge of as well, in order to make students with ADHD aware of the help that is available.

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