

Collaborate to support students with ADHD

By Elizabeth C. Hamblet

Many students struggle to adjust to the demands and lack of structure at college. For students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, the changes in the environment can be especially challenging.

The Accessing Campus Connections and Empowering Student Success program at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro is working to improve outcomes for these students.

Arthur D. Anastopoulos, Ph.D., the program's director and the principal investigator in a study focused on it, says the idea for the program grew out of his developmental perspective as a psychologist. As the director of a campus ADHD clinic, he had been thinking about the students coming in for documentation. They were sufficiently good students to get into college, but they were struggling. Looking to the research on college students with ADHD, he saw that there were studies about medication usage and effectiveness, but not on other kinds of treatments for them. He also observed that there were aspects of these students' everyday experiences that were not addressed by other campus services.

The ACCESS program is designed to improve students' academic performance and daily life by increasing knowledge of ADHD, adaptive thinking skills, use of behavioral strategies (e.g., planners and task lists), and awareness of available campus support services. The program is composed of two phases. In the eight-week active phase, students participate in a 90-minute weekly cognitive behavioral therapy group and a 30-minute individual mentoring session with trained mentors (typically graduate students). In the semester-long maintenance phase, students meet for weekly sessions with their mentor.

The program was first tested in an open trial funded by the College STAR project, using a cohort of 88 college students with ADHD. Improvements were observed in many areas, including credit hours attempted and earned, students' information processing, use of self-testing and study aids, academic motivation, and use of campus services.

The results were promising enough to encourage further testing with a larger group of 250 students from UNCG and Virginia Commonwealth

University in a randomized controlled study funded by the Institute of Education Sciences. Preliminary results from this study indicate students assigned to the ACCESS program show significant increases in knowledge of ADHD, adaptive thinking skills, use of behavioral strategies, and use of campus resources (particularly the use of disability services), compared to students receiving treatment as usual.

Students receiving ACCESS also demonstrate fewer symptoms of ADHD, depression, and anxiety, as well as improvements in organization, time management, and daily functioning, as compared to students not receiving ACCESS. And student participation in ACCESS was encouraging — a majority of students in the program completed at

least 80 percent of each phase of the treatment.

Obviously, this kind of big endeavor requires funding and staffing. But even if you can't coordinate such an effort through our office, you could partner with available resources on campus working with your students who have ADHD, including your academic advising department, counseling center, health center, behavioral intervention team, and tutoring center, among others.

Think about the areas ACCESS targets and figure out who on campus could help, and how. Perhaps the counseling center is already offering CBT, and officials there would be willing to put together a group just for students with ADHD. The Psychology Department might be able to find willing mentors to follow up on the lessons of a CBT group.

Even if you can't coordinate these kinds of activities, you could put together a flyer listing all resources on campus for students with ADHD (e.g., evaluation for medication at the health center, workshops at the counseling center) and make sure they're available at numerous locations on campus, and that staff there know about the flyers and are encouraged to refer students to them. Keep in mind that in the study, students' knowledge of ADHD increased tremendously, so providing them opportunities to learn more about their diagnosis and what could help might motivate them to access their available resources.

You can learn more about ACCESS at <https://accessproject.uncg.edu/>. ■

About the author

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