

Smooth Transition: Researchers Helping Freshmen With ADHD Succeed in College

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, affects 1 to 4 percent of college students, according to national studies. For freshmen with ADHD, the transition to college can be especially difficult.

Kristy Morgan, recent Kansas State University doctoral graduate in student affairs and higher education, Leavenworth, Kan., has studied ways to help college students with ADHD plan a successful transition to college. Research shows that college students with ADHD have a tangible struggle with a medical condition that cannot be dismissed as an everyday struggle.

“Nobody had really studied the transition from high school to college,” Morgan said. “Transitions can be the toughest time for people. This can be especially true when the transition is from the home environment where parents have been involved in daily plans, schedules and medication.”

“Kristy’s research is an important contribution to understanding and facilitating the transition to college for students with ADHD,” said Kenneth Hughey, professor and head of the department of special education, counseling and student affairs, and Morgan’s major professor for her doctoral work. “The results and the recommendations that followed are intended to help students with ADHD make a successful transition, their parents as they support their children in the transition, and student affairs professionals who work with the students once they are on campus.”

Morgan interviewed eight freshmen -- four men and four women -- to talk about their transition during their first semester of college. The freshmen were all living on campus and were at least an hour away from home.

Morgan found that these students with ADHD did not adequately plan their college transition. They did not factor ADHD into their decision-making about college, but rather chose a college based on how the campus felt, the reputation of the school or that it was where they had always wanted to attend.

“Most of the students found college to be tougher than they had expected,” Morgan said. “Even with the availability of resources, they still felt overwhelmed with accessing these resources.”

Students who had ADHD management strategies in place -- such as ways to keep a schedule or study for tests -- had established those before college, Morgan found. Students who did not have strategies in place before they went to college felt overwhelmed.

“A big struggle for students was adjusting to increased freedom and increased responsibility,” Morgan said. “They anticipated loving the freedom of college and being away from their parents. But they also realized that college required responsibility and that responsibility was overwhelming to them.”

Morgan found that parents and families continued to play a huge role in the transition process. Parents became involved in students’ college activities at a vigilant level -- they served as alarm clocks, organized their rooms and continued to manage medical care.

“The parents filled prescriptions and contacted doctors even while the student was at college, which

was surprising to me,” Morgan said. “The students really did not handle it independently.”

As a result, the students often lacked basic knowledge of ADHD and how their medication worked. Yet they believed that medication was crucial to their success in college because they needed it to help focus during lectures and studying time.

“There were some students who took medication sporadically prior to college,” Morgan said. “They realized that to be successful in college, their medication moved from optional to mandatory.”

Side effects influenced how often students took medication. Some students would not take medication because they felt it made them not as fun in social situations. The women in the study were more likely to consistently take medication because it helped suppress their appetites and manage weight. The men were more likely to skip their medication to have a good time.

Students with ADHD need support from family members and university staff to succeed, Morgan said. She developed recommendations for universities and families to support college students who have ADHD:

- * Families should inform students about their diagnoses. All too often, families have not educated students with ADHD because they think it might be just a childhood condition that they will outgrow.
- * Universities can streamline processes and make it easier for students to access resources. Students with ADHD are not likely to wait in long lines or fill out a lot of paperwork for resources.
- * Academic advisers can help students carefully structure their schedules for success. Many students with ADHD benefit when classes are scheduled close to each other, rather than spread out during an entire day. Advisers can also help students schedule classes with engaging professors and in rooms that have few distractions, such as windows or high-traffic hallways