

**F**OR MANY YEARS, college students struggled and took on debt based on a tacit bargain offered up by the world of work: Do the hard work, pay the high price of getting a bachelor's degree, and you'll more easily enter a career path that is readily available, higher paying, and more rewarding than any path that didn't require college. In short, college was worth the effort, even for those students with ADHD who had to work harder for that degree.

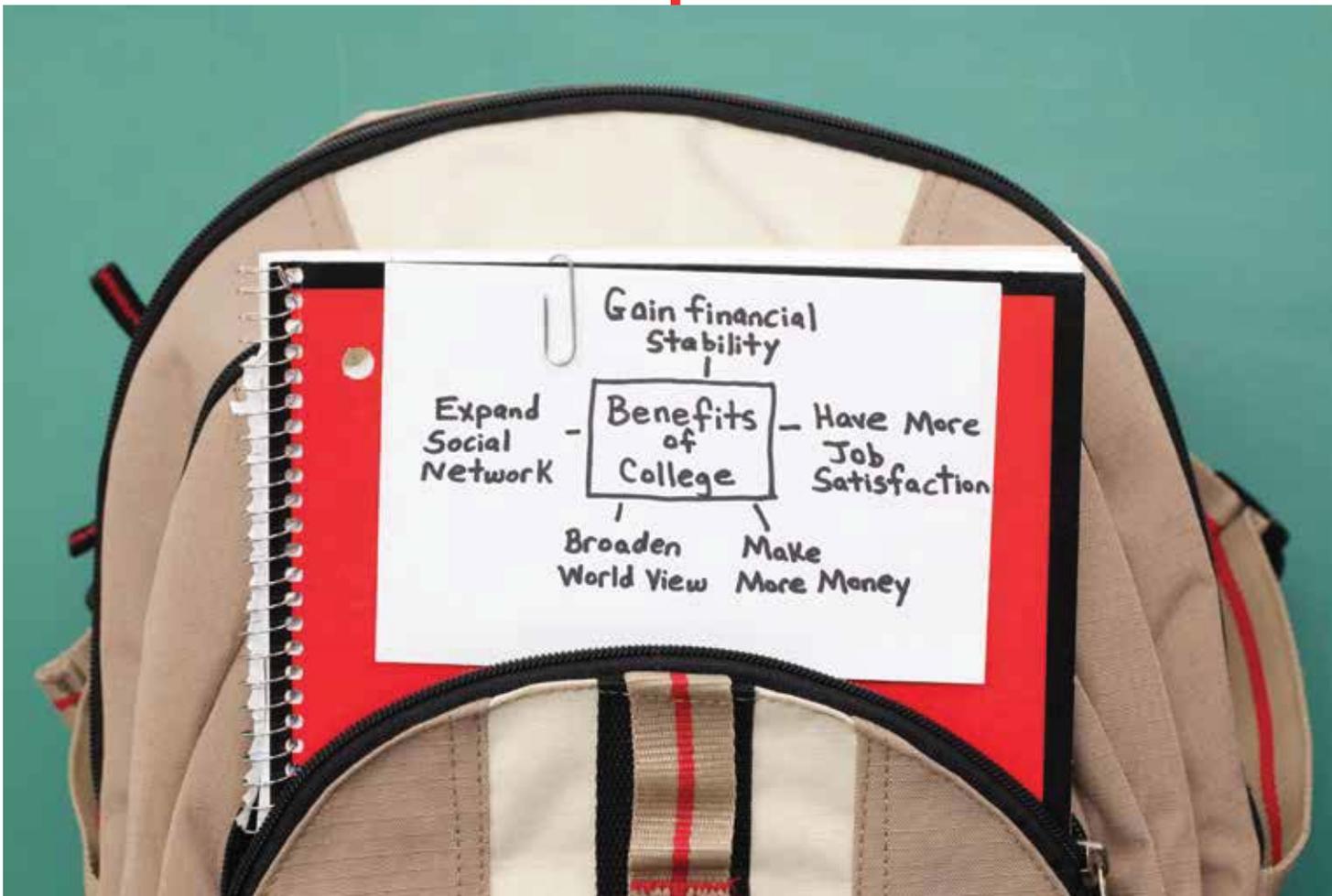
Around 2008 the economy began to change, and the old tacit deal was off the table. Suddenly, college graduates found themselves in a vast sea of degreed job seekers who, like themselves, were finding work scarce. Many considered themselves fortunate to take jobs that required only a high school diploma. Others found themselves drifting in a long span of unemployment or underemployment.

There were exceptions. The deal was still available for many students in the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Students with degrees outside of this arena found themselves unemployed, underemployed, or working at low-paying entry-level jobs that had little to do with their field of study.

But there were further exceptions. A category of well-paid, fulfilled students emerged—and they held degrees far outside the

# Make a College Degree Worth It

*by Jon Thomas, EdD, LPC*



STEM arena. How did they do that? Hint: Turns out ADHD helped it happen. But we'll get to that later.

### The job market is back!

In January 2015, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported an overall unemployment rate of 5.7 percent. The corresponding rate for workers with a bachelor's degree or higher came in at a healthy 2.8 percent, approaching full employment levels. According to a Bloomberg Business report, some financial analysts are concerned about an approaching shortfall of college-educated workers. According to the same report, these same workers earn significantly better pay and get more than twice the employer-funded postgraduate training than those with only a high school diploma.

### But is it back for everyone?

The job market report is welcome news and brings hope to many who had lost it. But does this news bring the same hope for those recession-era job-seekers with ADHD who are still searching for a meaningful career? What about those students with ADHD who are trying to simply pass and graduate college, who seem to lack direction or remaining resources to consult on a career path?

Forty percent of college-bound students are statistically destined to fail the first semester of college, and the number is higher for those who have ADHD. It's also likely that college graduates with ADHD will experience an unemployment rate much higher than the near full-employment rate of 2.8 percent for the general population of graduates.

Without adequate skills, tools, and guidance, many graduates who have ADHD will continue to struggle to find and keep a job. Recent studies show high school and college don't always provide the right skills for this important transition.

In January 2015, the Association of American Colleges and Universities published a study comparing student and employer perceptions of career readiness. The report indicated that students' perceptions of career readiness were much higher than employers' observations, especially in areas of key employer concern such as oral and written communication, critical thinking, team working skills, and creativity.

### Make college worth it

How can students and graduates with ADHD benefit from the recovering job market? Remember that category of grads I mentioned earlier, who seemed to find their way into a fulfilling career despite their field of study?

Over the past few years, I've had a chance to work with several of these successful graduates with ADHD and noted some common steps they took to succeed. When they started, most didn't know what they wanted to do after college, but they were deeply invested in using the college experience from day one to uncover the possibilities. These students strived to form professional relationships with professors, networked with potential employers and people in their prospective careers, found mentors, and spent summers in internships and activities that broadened their scope of the world of work. All of this helped

them determine their direction and take steps into this journey.

Through their discovery and determination, these students demonstrated the key skills employers are looking for: critical thinking, creativity, and communication skills.

Sure, these observations make a compelling case for developing key skills to build a successful

academic and employment future. But let's not overlook the innate struggle students with ADHD face in striving to hone these skills. Difficulty with social skills can undermine teamwork skills. Impulsivity challenges critical thinking. And problems with attention and executive functioning challenge effective communication.

The reality is this: Many students with ADHD need special and accommodated learning methods that help overcome the functional limitations of ADHD and develop skills for employment.

### Lessons learned

College must be a time to enhance creativity and develop critical thinking skills, teamwork skills, and excellent oral and written communication skills. Career development should begin before the first day of college and continue every day thereafter. Students need to develop networking and career investigative skills, gain career-related work experiences, and understand the power of mentoring. To achieve all this, they must develop heuristic life skills long before college begins.

Like any market, economic indicators and unemployment rates rise and fall. But those with ADHD will still face obstacles to successful employment. By refining and practicing key skills, they can mediate the uncertainty in the complex terrain of career paths. 🧠

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