

Post-Secondary School Options

By Scott Beeler

Think about your experience as a high-school graduate. You were excited about your achievement, exhilarated by the possibilities that stretched out before you. But your post-secondary years were also probably full of questions:

What will I do? Where will I live? Who will I be?

Young adults with AD/HD must also face this tangle of important life questions. But they must do so while contending with hurdles presented by their disorder: difficulty concentrating, problems with planning and, perhaps, accompanying emotional problems.

College-bound students have the advantage of taking a glide path into adulthood, taking four years to get an education, build lasting friendships and make career decisions.

But for students with AD/HD who are not college-bound, the post-secondary years can be particularly trying. Some may not have the skills that will enable them to live on their own or find work. Some may discover that their social circle has dwindled, with friends going off to college or pursuing their own paths in life. Other students, accustomed to the involvement of families and professionals in planning their education, may have little experience making decisions, a skill critical to achieving independence. But these young adults have options.

Individuals with AD/HD, learning disabilities, or other neurological disorders can turn to a number of post-secondary programs. They vary in size, cost and the services they provide, but all aim to help young adults achieve a measure of self-sufficiency.

Where independence happens

Students needing more intensive support and training can find it at a number of residential programs that provide intensive training, a kaleidoscope of activities and an open-ended timeframe.

These programs typically begin with a two-year residential component, where students live in a highly structured environment. Young adults learn basic living skills through a mix of one-to-one support, hands-on instruction, counseling and working at paying or volunteer jobs.

Once they graduate, students have learned enough about budgeting, time

management, cooking and cleaning to move into an outreach or community program. They can live with roommates in an apartment or in a group home, managing their own lives but receiving support as necessary.

"That's where independence really happens," says Helen Bosch, executive director of Vista Vocational and Life Skills Center, a Westbrook, Conn., program with a total of 150 students.

Another one of the largest and oldest post-secondary programs, Chapel Haven in Westville, Conn., serves adults through their fifties in its community program. Betsy Katz, a 30-year-old participant in Chapel Haven's community program, lives in an apartment on her own.

"If I never came to Chapel Haven, I don't think I'd be where I am right now," Katz says.

Broad-based programs like Chapel Haven offer extensive social programs driven by student interests: dancing and cultural events, but also fishing trips and a ceramics studio. Judy Lefkowitz, Chapel Haven's director of admissions and recruitment, says the size of the program offers a "ready-made social community," critical to students who may be developing a social network for the first time.

Because of the all-encompassing nature of programs like Vista and Chapel Haven, they come with hefty price tags. Annual costs can run in the mid-\$30,000 range for the residential programs.

Desire to get a life

Students may not be going to college, but they can still take advantage of campus life with a different kind of post-secondary program that blends education, vocational training and life-skills training.

Carol Burns, director of the Professional Assistance Center for Education (PACE) at National Louis University in Chicago, said her program serves students with cognitive and learning disabilities that are not likely to succeed in a degree-granting program. Still, these students can learn much in a college environment.

"They have a strong desire to get a life," Burns said, "to make a contribution to the community and to get away from their parents."

Students at PACE live in a dorm, attend specially designed classes two days a week

and work three days in internships. Tuition, room and board run about \$20,000 a year at PACE, one of three similar programs in the country.

Burns said the PACE program provides young adults with a peer group and social opportunities, some for the first time.

"If there's anything students talk about at the end, it's the relationships that are the most vivid to them," Burns said.

Part of the real world

Other programs, like Georgia-based Life Skills Inc., have a looser structure. Delia Fleming, director of Life Skills, says the program's six students live in apartments and hold down jobs. Fleming and her staff provide individualized supports to students, but do so within the context of a student's job and life interests. Enrollment in the Life Skills program runs \$1,700 per month.

Fleming calls the Life Skills approach "semi-independent" living. The term acknowledges that students will need some ongoing assistance, but also recognizes that they enter the program bearing some responsibility for daily living.

"These kids are now part of the real world," Fleming says. "The whole thrust of the program is to get them as independent as possible."

Some young adults will find help at non-residential programs. The Adult Program, an affiliate of the Allegheny County (Pa.) Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities, serves individuals aged 18 and older. Barbara Monroe, the program's director, says the typical enrollee attends the program for two half-days each week at the downtown Pittsburgh facility, usually in a group setting of four to six people.

Monroe says she works with students to set their own goals. Some want to go on to college, others are trying to develop skills to get jobs or to keep the ones they have. Most of the students in the Adult Program are funded through the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation.

Skills for self-sufficiency

Whatever post-secondary experience students with AD/HD choose, they need to develop a repertoire of skills necessary to lead an independent, self-directed life. But what exactly are these skills? Experts at post-secondary programs target numerous

skills for development, including:

Vocational Skills A primary aim of post-secondary programs is to help students become workers. Young adults receive training on actual job tasks, but also learn what it means to be a good employee: arriving on time, dressing appropriately, and interacting with supervisors. Many programs also emphasize the importance of developing career interests and goals.

Social Skills Social relationships are one key to a fulfilling life. Some programs offer counseling and workshops to help young adults improve skills like conflict resolution and interpersonal communication. Regular events and outings give students opportunities to hone communications skills and develop personal interests.

Life Skills These basic survival skills for living an independent life include: cooking, cleaning, using transportation and taking medications. Students with AD/HD often need help learning to plan a schedule and handle money.

Adult Thinking Skills Equally important to keeping the apartment clean and managing the budget are what Vista's Helen Bosch calls "adult thinking skills." These include controlling impulsive behavior and exercising sound judgment in social situations. Another important component: learning the difference between aggressive, assertive and passive behavior, and learning when to be assertive.

The skills students learn often apply across categories. Social skills will certainly help during a job interview, for instance.

The tug of letting go

Students undoubtedly need to learn a set of skills to gain as much independence as possible, but the post-secondary transition also requires a shift in responsibility from the family to the individual. This shift can be difficult for the young adults and families involved.

"They kind of have an external view of the world when they come here," Bosch says of many Vista students. "They still have the view that the world is there to take care of them."

"Every parent knows the tug of letting go," Lefkowitz adds. "And it's even harder when you have a son with a disability."

But some parents of some young adults with AD/HD don't let go, remaining in established patterns of caring for their children that can delay or stifle a young adult's transition into independence.

Monroe agrees that the young adults she sees often have relied heavily on their families. But she has a different perspective because her part-time Adult Program serves post-adolescents already living lives in the community. Some of the more successful program participants have held down less-than-satisfying jobs for a few years after high school. The experience sometimes drives these 21- or 22-year-olds to set specific, career-oriented goals for themselves.

Where to turn?

Currently, there are only what Lefkowitz calls "a smattering" of programs in the United States. And the programs that are available belong to no centralized umbrella organization, so there are few places for families to turn for information.

To explore post-secondary options, Fleming recommends participation in national organizations like CHAAD, Learning Disabilities Association, the Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities or the Council for Exceptional Children, which provide parents with networking opportunities and access to information. Families can also see the list of programs, by no means exhaustive, that accompanies this article.

Another big problem: money. The cost of residential programs can be out of reach for many families. Some students receive Supplemental Security Income, and others may receive some Medicaid funding, according to Lefkowitz.

"There's no broad-based funding," Bosch says, "but there are bits and pieces."

Burns says students at the PACE program can receive some higher education funding through Plus loans and Pell grants. Sometimes school districts will pay a portion of the tuition, according to Burns, and on occasion the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation will contribute.

At Pittsburgh's ACLD-affiliated Adult Program, Monroe says most students receive funding through OVR. She suggests families contact their state's OVR to see what funding and services are available.

Managing life

Young adults often struggle to reach a degree of self-sufficiency, and young adults with AD/HD are no exception. But people like Chapel Haven's Betsy Katz have used post-secondary programs as a stepping stone to adult life.

Katz now has her own New Haven apartment. She had the option of finding a roommate, but the 30-year-old Katz prefers to live alone. Katz pays her own bills and travels regularly to Puerto Rico, where her parents run the family business. She credits Chapel Haven's program for helping her gain the skills necessary to lead her active life, and she's proud of the independence she's achieved.

Most observers with experience in the post-secondary field agree that young adults with AD/HD are an underserved population. But Burns thinks the tide could be turning.

"There's more understanding that people with disabilities deserve a life," Burns says, "that they shouldn't be sequestered away."

Scott Beeler is an award-winning journalist and freelance writer. He spent several years in book publishing, acquiring and developing titles on AD/HD, education and other topics. Scott lives in York, Pa. with his wife and 8-month-old daughter.

Post-Secondary Programs

There are a number of excellent programs around the country. Here are just a few of the programs available.

Allegheny County ACLD Adult Program
100 Wood Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
(412) 281-3877

Bancroft, Inc.
Hopkins Lane Box 20
Haddonfield, NJ 08033
(856) 429-0010

Benchmark Young Adult School
1377 E. Citrus Avenue, Suite 122
Redlands, CA 92374
(800) 474-4848

Chapel Haven
1040 Whalley Avenue
New Haven, CT 06515
(203) 397-1714

Cloister Creek Educational Center, Inc.
1280 Highway 138, SW
Conyers, GA 30208
(770) 483-0748

The Lab School of Washington
4759 Reservoir Road, NW
Washington, D.C. 20007
(202) 965-6600

Lesley College Threshold Program
29 Everett Street
Cambridge, MA 02138-2790
(617) 349-8185/(800) 999-1959, ext. 8181

Hill Top Preparatory School
South Ithan & Clyde Road
Rosemont, PA 19010
(610) 527-3230

Project G.R.O.W./Riverview School
551 Route 6A
East Sandwich, MA 02537
(508) 888-0489

Maplebrook School
P.O. Box 118
Amenia, NY 12501
(914) 373-8191

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