



On the Way to Work

by Jon L. Thomas, EdD, LPC

YOUNG PEOPLE, especially those with ADHD, are increasingly caught in the crosshairs of concerning and intersecting trends in postsecondary education and the world of work.

Throughout 2019, business magazines such as *Forbes* and *Inc.* chronicled the decline in college enrollment and the rising costs of college education. According to these reports, many young people are opting out of postsecondary education and training, choosing instead to go directly to work. Meanwhile, the demand for unskilled labor is dropping, and employers struggle to find qualified, responsible candidates with the requisite skills and training to fill their workforce needs.

■ The importance of college is decreasing in students' minds.

In the fall of 2019, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported a decline in college enrollment of approximately 300,000 students compared to 2018 enrollment. The percentage of young adults who consider attending college “very important” has dropped significantly since 2013.

■ The case for college is harder than ever to make.

Multiple interrelating circumstances explain this trend. Low unemployment and improved economy, lower birthrate, increasing costs of college, burgeoning college debt, and low entry-level wages for college graduates are but a few. However, students are having trouble finding compelling reasons to undertake an expensive and difficult academic path that offers little monetary benefit.



■ **Employers can't find the skilled workforce they need.**

Meanwhile, in a job market approaching full employment, employers are experiencing increasing difficulty filling vacant positions. They report encountering applicants who lack essential hard skills and work experience, as well as the soft skills needed for collaboration and teamwork, communications, problem-solving, creative thinking, and the organizational skills required for today's workplace. In short, employers are having trouble finding skilled and qualified people to fill jobs.

Against this backdrop, institutions of higher education are lumbering slowly into response mode. A recent *Forbes* article predicts a move toward greater job-readiness preparation in college, including increases in experiential work-based training, cooperative work opportunities, credentialing acquisition, and portfolio devel-

opment. Colleges will provide or facilitate certifications, not just in information technology, but also in those areas related to oral and written communications, conflict resolution, collaborative work, interpersonal relationships, and other soft skills.

In the face of these trends, a growing number of high school graduates are opting to go directly into the workforce. Students opting out of college is not alarming—not everyone needs or can benefit from college. What is of greatest concern, however, is that these unskilled entry-level jobs do not pay a living wage and the demand for unskilled labor is declining fast. All the while, employers struggle to fill jobs with educated, trained, and qualified candidates.

Whether through college or training, postsecondary education is vital to obtaining and growing a sustainable career and lifestyle. Without it, young people face an uncertain future. Beyond the obvious and valid frustrations about college debt and the relative

benefits of the effort further education requires, what else might explain this phenomenon of opting out? And more importantly, what can be done about it?

Especially vulnerable

Students with ADHD are especially vulnerable when it comes to obtaining the skills desired by employers. Since they are among those who tend to fail college and never try again or take longer to graduate, students with ADHD are likely overrepresented in this trend of avoiding higher education.

In many ways it makes sense that impulsive decision-making for immediacy of reward often blocks a more practical path for students with ADHD. Continued sustained attention in academic environments after years of such torment weigh in low on their list of “what would be fun to do next.” Students with ADHD hear the statistics telling them that college graduates earn significantly more over a lifetime and fare better in times of recession and economic downturn, but considering the outcomes they hear from students who graduated before them, it makes sense that they might lose hope and patience. After working so hard for so many years, why work hard to get a college degree that most likely leads to a low-paying entry-level job?

If we look deeper, however, the explanation appears more complex, and perhaps even paradoxical. What if students with ADHD are making this impulsive choice by default because they lack the requisite precursor skills to navigate today’s rapidly changing world of education and work? What if the same missing and undeveloped skills that lead to circumventing college are the same requisite skills employers seek (and are not finding) in the workplace of today?

The skills for exploring self in the context of the world of work, deciding on a career, and planning and executing a plan to prepare for a career, require some of the same foundational skills needed to function well in today’s workplace—collaborative and teamworking skills, communications skills, problem-solving skills, creativity, and organization. The common denominators of these foundational skills include critical thinking, executive function, and social/emotional intelligence. These are all familiar areas of challenge for students with ADHD, both for developing these skills and for generalizing them into more challenging structures—like college and work.

Students who do better in college and emerge with a strong career path tend to be those who find mentors, engage in internships, and find other areas of work experience in their field of study. Though seemingly simple, these activities require complex social, organizational, and critical thinking skills.

Solving the problem of skill deficits

Students with ADHD can be supported to find success in the workplace. Work-preparedness education needs to step up how

those with ADHD can be ready to work and thrive. More than ever before—and early in the transition process—students with ADHD need to find ways to improve and accommodate for related difficulties in critical thinking, social/emotional intelligence, and executive function, as these are the precursor skills that will guide them effectively into sustainable and fulfilling careers. Solutions to resolving these foundational skills deficits tend to more long-range if not forward thinking.

Political solutions to academic content and process offer some hope. Practitioners who guide these students to the next steps are important as well. Efforts that bring these skills deficits into the IEP process, the focus of family planning for college, or areas of private counseling, academic coaching, or tutoring can improve outcomes.

Developing innovative methods for bringing greater focus to acquiring, utilizing, and carrying these foundational skills successfully into new contexts are key to filling the gap between employer needs and student dreams. Just as we use mnemonics to recall words and sequences, and music recalls feelings, students with ADHD need to develop and use heuristic language—anchored tags for recalling concepts that lead to engaging in conceptual and ordered ways of thinking.

In our program, for example, students develop a post-high school plan of action using a heuristic we call *Method, Motive, Opportunity*:

- **Method** keys exploring and inventorying the “how to do it aspects,” or skills required to accomplish a goal or solve a problem.
- **Motive** brings the student into curiosity about the motivation needed to sustain effort with a set of tasks.
- **Opportunity** leads to investigating whether all the elements of setting, timing, and resources are available to achieve the goal or solve the problem. In this way, the student develops a fuller picture and richer plan for moving forward.

Modeled from forensic science, this simple tool invites students to consider a broader perspective with more variables for solving problems and attaining goals, while simultaneously providing a means of sorting these numerous variables.

Even with enlightened and innovative support and guidance, responsibility ultimately falls to the student to garner and embrace the vulnerability necessary to recognize these skills as diamonds in the rough that require some polish. Perhaps, with enough polish, students will see the larger picture of the emerging world of work, postsecondary education, and their ideal path through it all. 🎧

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