

Stepping Back



ALTHOUGH WE ALL FEEL like the pandemic has stretched on forever, it may surprise you to learn that for today's high school seniors, statistics back up that feeling. Slightly more than 30% of their total high school experience has taken place during the pandemic. How does this impact college readiness? That is one of the many questions that educators, parents, and students themselves are asking as we begin to anticipate that the vaccine may allow schools to resume to in-person classes in the fall of 2021.

to Move Forward

Like all of learning during the pandemic, the transition to college was not typical. The National Student Clearinghouse states that college enrollment was down 13.1% for fall 2020. While many students in this year's freshman class chose to postpone rather than take online classes, they had the opportunity to participate in college readiness and college advising programs prior to the pandemic. The freshman class of 2021, for the most part, will not have participated in these college transition programs that help them determine their college readiness and guide them through a selection, standardized testing, and acceptance process.

With at least a significant part of school since March 2020 being online, high school students have been forced to evaluate their executive functions. They have had to consider how they plan, organize, time-manage, advocate, self-regulate, and complete academic tasks. The independence to which they have adjusted is typical of the adjustments of a college freshman. This can allow for greater self-awareness, but without a robust level of college counseling being readily available to this year's seniors, some families, particularly families with children who did not manage their executive functions well, will be looking for college readiness classes, gap year options, college living experience programs, or community college prior to attending a four-year college or university.

Can something good come out of this?

Prior to the pandemic, significant research described high school students as overscheduled, overworked, and overly anxious. Disparities were evident between students of wealth and everyone else. The college admission process was often creating a perceived need for perfection that seemed unattainable. Speaking of the pandemic in an interview with the New York Times, Brené Brown stated, "A crisis highlights all of our fault lines. We can pretend that we have nothing to learn, or we can take this opportunity to own the truth and make a better future for ourselves

Executive Dysfunction, Heightened Anxiety, and the Impact on College Readiness

Kathryn Essig, MEd, and Janet Price

and others." In some ways, the pandemic has changed that anxious trajectory for any student who wants to step back and take a closer look at post-secondary options.

This anxiety and need for self-assessment is heightened for the student with ADHD or executive dysfunction. A CDC national survey conducted in 2016 determined that 33% of children diagnosed with ADHD also have a comorbid diagnosis of anxiety and 17% are also diagnosed with depression. Conducted from May 4-14, 2020, a Harris poll determined that there is a 55% increase in anxiety due to the uncertainty of the pandemic, a 45% increase in excessive stress, and a 43% increase in depression among the 1,500 students who were part of the poll.

We know that the pandemic has been particularly hard for students with ADHD and executive dysfunction. Therefore, a self-assessment for many may include the steps that they need to take to be assured that they are ready for the transition to college.

Considerations for assessing college readiness

College readiness encompasses much more than grades. For students with executive dysfunction and other special needs, a critical part of this self-assessment means taking a hard look at the soft skills and self-advocacy strategies that are so crucial to accessing support at the postsecondary level.

This lost year has also meant lost opportunities to practice independence, especially if parents have felt respon-

sible for being more hands-on and proactive in their support while home with their students all day. A more typical trajectory would be for parents to use the last stages of high school to step back and allow their children to experience the natural consequences that result from missteps. Non-academic, or soft skills, might include waking up on their own, independently following a schedule, dressing appropriately for the weather, or maybe cooking dinner one night a week when parents are working late.

How do these skills translate to postsecondary expectations? Although we have heard parents say they plan to give their children a wake-up call each morning in college, we all know that this is not a sustainable practice! Think about whether your child is prepared to transition from staying at home this past year with their parents to the independence and lack of direct oversight in a college campus environment. Some questions to ask are:

- What is your child's morning routine?
- What is their evening routine? Are they up all night playing video games? If they are suddenly dropped into a world where parties are once again a thing, will they have the impulsivity control to skip a night of socializing to study for an exam and get a good night's sleep?
- What will their nutrition be like left to their own choices?
- Can they manage medication independently? Refill a prescription when necessary?
- After a year of distance and often asynchronous learning, how will they interact with their professor? Bear in mind, while many high schools have moved away from classroom participation affecting grades, this is still a big factor when it comes to college.
- Is your child prepared to obtain and use accommodations in college? In a world where IEP implementation has changed drastically, have they met their goals in an authentic manner?

If the answer to most of these questions raises an alarm, it may be that the best option for postsecondary success is to pause and take some time to build these foundational skills that did not have a chance to manifest fully during COVID.

Additional postsecondary options

This college preparation may come in many forms that were always available, but not necessarily popular. A gift to many students, and particularly to students who are diagnosed with ADHD or executive dysfunction, will be the greater acceptance of alternatives to directly moving from high school to college. While that transition may remain the most popular, the pandemic has taught us that we are not programmed to act without community support, and alternative paths can be successful paths.

With a continuum of support available to graduating seniors, students can engage in anything from a college readiness course, to community college, exploring a gap year program, taking a PG year, or enrolling in a postsecondary transition program that provides direct instruction and support in these areas. There are several postsecondary programs that are available to students throughout the United States:

- Students who just need a class that describes the differences between how we approach high school and college have a variety of options. An example of this type of class is *The Art of Self, the Launch to College*, which is taught by Essig Education Group.
- Students who want to go with full knowledge of their strengths and vulnerabilities or who want to apply for college accommodations should consider *Successing*, a combination of neuropsychological testing, working with a psychologist to truly understand the findings, and then working with an executive function coach to learn how to approach the college syllabi and classes. They can be reached at info@successing.com.
- Students who want to attend college but need more significant support with executive function, social skills, and independent living skills might want to consider *College Living Experience*. CLE has seven centers around the country which are all co-located near a variety of colleges, universities, and community colleges. Students attending CLE live in apartments near one of the centers with support from CLE staff in independent living skills while taking college classes and receiving daily tutoring and executive function support from CLE tutors. Students also attend a variety of supported social activities.

If we have learned anything in 2020, it has been how to revise expectations and be flexible in the moment. We are more aware that success comes in many forms and should continue to mold our children's educational experiences to be the most positive rather than most prestigious experience they can have. While hard taught, these lessons can and should be applied as we help our children move forward with re-entry into a post-COVID paradigm. 📍

Kathryn Essig, MEd, founder and president of Essig Education Group, has spent years working in special education as a teacher, diagnostician, curriculum specialist, program author, and executive function coach. With ever-increasing numbers of bright students experiencing academic struggles, Essig's practice focuses on the intersection of executive function, resilience, and learned independence.

Janet Price is the assistant vice president for outreach and admissions at College Living Experience. She is the coauthor of *Take Control of Asperger's Syndrome: The Official Strategy Guide for Teens with Asperger's and Nonverbal Learning Disorders (a 2010 Legacy Book Award Winner)* and *Take Control of Dyslexia and Other Reading Difficulties: The Ultimate Guide for Kids*.