

ADHD and Online Higher Education Programs

MANAL WHITE



DURING THE PANDEMIC that began in early 2020, students throughout the United States had the unique opportunity of learning through solely technological means. A learning curve was expected for students and instructors as lessons were digitalized and creative means were required to be used for students to still feel like they were in a face-to-face classroom.

By 2021, protests erupted as parents fought for their student children or adults to go back to a traditional classroom, because their students were falling behind the learning curve due to their disability. Online courses were not a new concept, however, and there are accommodations that can be made to help reduce barriers of an online learning environment for students with disabilities.

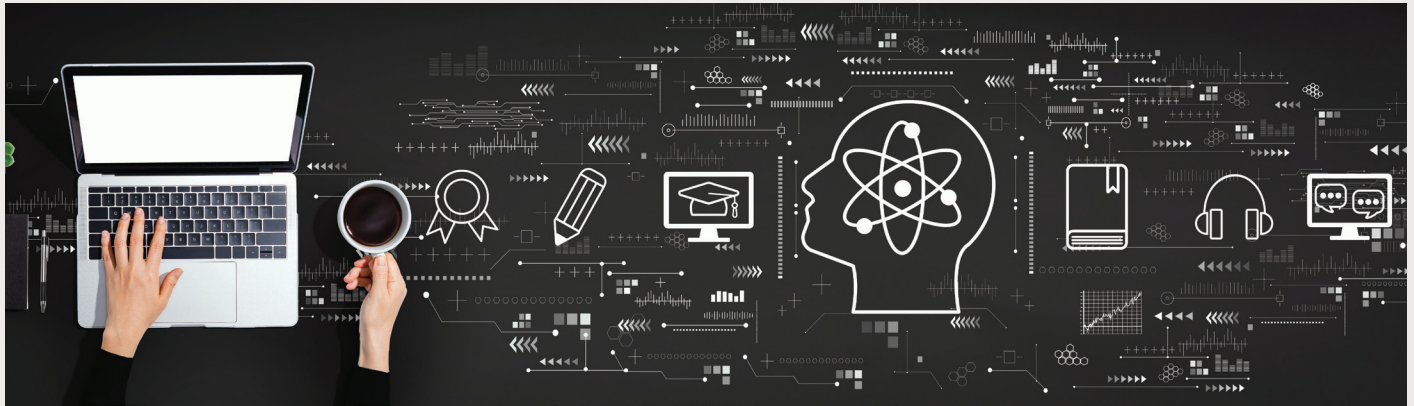
Surprisingly, distance learning college courses began in the 1840s with the creation of the US Postal Service. In the 1950s, college courses were televised. In 1989, the University of Phoenix was the first institution to launch an online college program to offer bachelor's and master's degrees. In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed, so all educational institutions, including online institutions, learned about implementing accommodations for students with disabilities at the same time. Online institutions provided accommodations so that students with cognitive deficits or slower processing/working speeds due to their medical conditions can have equal access to their learning materials.

Online educational programs have been marketed to nontraditional students as the perfect way to get a degree on their own time around their own schedule. The nontraditional students usually include working professionals and parenting students. However, students with ADHD have been drawn to these programs since 2000 for the flexibility of asynchronous courses. Success in these types of programs depends on where the students are in their academic journey.

This article will discuss the benefits and setbacks of online programs for students with ADHD based on the most common paths taken prior to enrolling in an online higher education program: recent high school graduates, working adults returning to college to complete their degree, and students transferring directly from another higher education institution.

The traditional college student

Students who recently graduated from a traditional high school and may have had an IEP and a 504 plan during their studies tend to transition into online programs with a little more difficulty than students who have not been in an online educational program or a higher education program previously. Although the ability to create a school schedule around one's job, family, and social life is beneficial, it takes time to set the schedule.



The traditional college student must transition to the college environment, and learning self-discipline to create a study schedule without a structured learning environment can be overwhelming. ADHD and executive dysfunction can make this more overwhelming. The anxiety that often runs comorbid with ADHD can cause a student to avoid the assignments altogether if the student is overwhelmed. If self-discipline has already been established, then the online learning experience will allow a traditional student to jump-start their career and gain experience while in school.

Some students try not to transfer their 504 plans or IEPs over because they either a) think it transfers over automatically, b) want to try to take classes without accommodations, or c) do not know about the resources available in these online programs. Usually, those who do reach out do have parental assistance when requesting accommodations and learn about educational resources from the disability or accessibility service offices.

The working adult returning to college

The negative aspect that we hear the most about with this educational path is that the student is trying to get back into a rhythm to complete their degree. The first couple of semesters are a rough transition as these students learn to juggle school, work, and family, but ADHD almost becomes their “superpower” in this way.

Students with ADHD tend to excel under the pressure of multiple commitments, because they can multi-task and prioritize better under pressure. However, students with ADHD can still experience writer’s and reader’s block if they become overwhelmed with external stressors. Many of these students were not diagnosed with ADHD until adulthood and now have a better understanding of why they struggled with school in the past. Now that social media has shed light on the inner workings of ADHD, these students are self-aware of their struggles and have learned how to live with ADHD. This self-awareness is beneficial when these students experience the reader’s/writer’s block and reach out to utilize educational resources to assist them.

The transfer student

Students transferring from other institutions usually have already figured out what works best for them and how to juggle school and their personal lives. These students tend to have the easiest transition into an online program because of the self-discipline they already had to learn in their prior institutions. The online program generally feels more isolated for these students, who may be used to structured office hours and lessons. These students are typically aware of educational resources and take full advantage of them. Sometimes, they believe that their resources are the same everywhere, and that can be a drawback as well.

ALL THESE STUDENTS WILL EXPERIENCE the same struggles with their ADHD, but the different paths taken can determine the difficulty of the transition on an online program. The freedom of asynchronous courses can become overwhelming for any student; however, students with ADHD are forced to learn how to create a schedule and balance their studies with their personal and professional lives.

The quicker students learn strategies that will best help them and learn about their schools’ resources, the better they will do in their online programs. All schools will have a writing center to help students push through their executive dysfunction and start their papers. Disability and/or accessibility offices will provide accommodations and sometimes assistive technology to help students overcome the barriers that ADHD may cause. Extra time on exams, the ability to take breaks during exams, extra time on larger assignments, and short and concise clarification on instructions are some of the most common accommodations needed to overcome the barriers that students with ADHD face. **A**



Manal White is an accessibility/disability services professional who has been serving nontraditional college students since 2014. She was diagnosed with ADHD after graduating from the College of William and Mary (BA 2013, MA 2016). She currently also serves on the Maryland AHEAD Board of Executives and teaches history at the University of Maryland Global Campus.

A Successful Return to College

Adam is a college student... again.

College was not a great experience for him the first time around. As an eighteen-year-old, Adam struggled to master independent work demands and to resist the pull of the social temptations of college life. He performed poorly at two different schools before transferring to a college exclusively for students with ADHD and learning disabilities. There he earned a two-year associate degree. Adam's graduation was both a triumph and a relief for him. He never wanted to take a college class again, though he told his family that he would go back to school if the time came that he felt he needed to.

At the age of thirty-six, Adam felt he needed some career-focused training and a four-year college degree to reach his professional goals. With the maturity, stability, and goal-orientation he had acquired in the intervening years, Adam was ready to try it again.

Excited to be accepted on a part-time basis by a traditional four-year college, Adam began attending classes again. It was a discouraging experience. Neither the professors nor the advisers were attuned to the needs of a working, older student with ADHD. But persistence was one of Adam's strong suits, so he looked for a better fit in a school. He found it in an online college that

had a good reputation and specifically catered to a diverse group of older students.

For Adam, online college has worked out even better than he had hoped. He pointed to the following advantages:

- The advisers—called “academic success coaches” at his school—actively help him to identify and sign up for courses that will move him along toward his career goals. In the past, he was left on his own or given minimal direct advice about his career path. At his current school, the coaches are knowledgeable and collaborative in determining what's needed and steering him along his path. As a student who has organizational weaknesses, he is thrilled to have that input.
- The classes are all offered online, and they are asynchronous. So, he can listen to lectures and complete the work on his own schedule. His assignment list is posted once a week, and he can complete the work any time within that week. As a working student, that's important for Adam. As a student with ADHD, it allows him to take breaks or days off, as needed.
- Despite the flexibility, there is a good deal of structure built into the class format. For example, each week he must go online to mark each assignment as complete before

he can access quizzes or tests. Further, he finds the expectations to be more clear than at other schools. Every professor posts all assignments online, including scoring rubrics. He can access it all at any time.

- Class information is centralized and consistent from one professor to the next. Adam logs in to his account, and from there he can access all assignments, due dates, scoring rubrics, and necessary links. If he is expected to participate in a discussion board, for example, the link to that discussion group is on the class page. Each class is laid out on the same template, with the same tabs and visual appearance.
- Adam can customize his course load, and he can change it up from one semester to the next. The classes are condensed, lasting eight weeks, with more than one start date. So, this semester, Adam is taking a full course load of four classes, but he is taking only two classes at a time. Overwhelmed when he has many courses to juggle at the same time, taking fewer courses allows him to focus on what he needs to do.

Adam is a college student again. And now, he feels like he's finally in the right place at the right time.

—Adam's Mother

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