

# Research finds college students with ADHD are likely to experience significant challenges

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According to a 2017 UCLA study, students with ADHD make up about 6% of the college student population and represent the most common type of disability supported by college disability offices. But are these students receiving enough academic support from their institutions? Despite ADHD being prevalent among college students, there has been little research focused on how having ADHD impacts the transition to college and ongoing academic success. Until now.

New research from George DuPaul, professor of school psychology and associate dean for research in Lehigh University's College of Education, and colleagues confirms students with ADHD face consequential challenges in succeeding and completing [college](#) and predicts ways academic success can be improved.

The paper, "Academic Trajectories of College Students with and without ADHD: Predictors of Four-Year Outcomes," by DuPaul and colleagues

from the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, University of Rhode Island, and University of Nebraska-Lincoln, was published in the *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*.

The study, which is one of largest and most comprehensive investigations of college students with ADHD ever conducted, is the first to systematically examine the functioning of ADHD students across four years of college.

"College students with ADHD are likely to experience significant academic difficulties throughout their college years, are at higher than average risk for dropping out of college and require academic support prior to and throughout their college years," said DuPaul.

Through annual psychological and educational evaluations of more than 400 college students, half of whom were identified with ADHD, the researchers assessed multiple academic outcomes including GPA by semester, progress toward graduation by academic year, self-reported study skills by academic year and college drop-out status. The four-year study involved [student](#) participants from colleges in North Carolina, Pennsylvania, including Lehigh University, and Rhode Island.

The researchers found that on average, college students with ADHD received grades that were half a grade level below their peers and that this deficit was present across all four years. Additionally, results showed that college students with ADHD were significantly less likely to stay enrolled across semesters.

"It was somewhat surprising to see the magnitude of the academic deficits experienced by college students with ADHD because these were students who had the skills to successfully graduate from

high school and matriculate in a four-year college or university," explained DuPaul. "We expected smaller declines in their educational performance in college."

Although medication did not substantially improve academic outcomes, the researchers found that there were several variables that predicted [academic success](#) for students with ADHD, including having fewer depression symptoms, possessing better executive functioning skills like planning and time management, and having received educational accommodations in [high school](#) as well as academic support services in college.

DuPaul hopes the findings will be of interest to college disabilities offices, health care and mental health professionals who work with college-aged students, higher education faculty and administrators, as well as individuals with ADHD and their families.

"Our findings highlight the importance of providing academic support services for students with ADHD prior to college matriculation, the vital need to improve executive functioning skills in these students, and necessity to screen for and treat depressive symptoms experienced by [college students](#) with ADHD," said DuPaul.

**More information:** George J. DuPaul et al, Academic Trajectories of College Students with and without ADHD: Predictors of Four-Year Outcomes, *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology* (2021). DOI: [10.1080/15374416.2020.1867990](https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2020.1867990)

Provided by Lehigh University

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