

**The Virginia Commonwealth University Supported Education Model:  
Effective Strategies and Supports for College  
Students with Learning Disabilities and Attention Deficit Disorders**

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***Nature of the Problem Addressed***

As a result of the increasing number of students entering post secondary education, disability support service offices across the nation are faced with providing more varied and specialized services to meet this demand. The amount and type of support services offered cover a wide spectrum and often vary from campus to campus (Getzel, Stodden, & Briel, 2001). In most instances, however, very little systematic planning has been done in the development of services provided in higher education institutions across the country (Anderson, 1998; Norlander, Shaw, & McGuire, 1990).

Even though there is a wide array of supports being used to accommodate students with disabilities, there is not a body of knowledge within the postsecondary education and disability field that addresses the question of which specific accommodations are appropriate for students and under what conditions these accommodations are applied (Anderson, 1998; Eichhorn, 1997; NCSPEs, 2000). One concept that needs further study in higher education is a supported education model for students with disabilities. Students served through this model typically have significant obstacles and life skill issues (e.g. medication management, personal assistance services, financial assistance) to overcome in order to successfully complete their education. Current supported education models designed over the past decade have focused on students with psychiatric disabilities or attention deficit disorders (Loewen, 1993; Pettella, Tarnoczy, & Geller, 1996; Unger, 1998), and have not been fully integrated into postsecondary education support systems.

The Virginia Commonwealth University Supported Education model has been designed and implemented to incorporate more specialized services and supports for students with disabilities into the typical routines of campus life. The model uses the principles of supported education which is a consumer-driven, individualized support system utilizing community and university resources, and structures these resources to meet short and long term goals of students (Cooper, 1993; Egniew, 1993; Unger, 1998). The model was implemented through the VCU Disability Support Services Offices on both the academic and medical campus. The intent of the study conducted by VCU was to determine

the effectiveness of a supported education model within the context of a Disability Support Services Office.

### ***Implementation of the Supported Education Model***

The model was designed to provide intensive educational supports to an intact cohort of students with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders. Beginning in the fall semester of 2001 and ending fall of 2002, a cohort of 27 students participated in the model implementation study. The services were delivered as part of the Disability Support Services Office on the VCU academic and medical campus. Students with disabilities were referred to the program by faculty members, DSS staff, or by self-referral (see table below). Once students entered the program, Academic Specialists, who were staff at the VCU Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (VCU-RRTC) worked with the students to identify their specific educational support needs. This information was used to develop a student profile on each participant, and to develop an Individualized Academic Support Plan. Based on the needs identified through the Plan, the student and the Academic Specialist met or communicated by email to determine how the supports were implemented and were effective in helping the students.

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### ***Research Findings***

To obtain results from the students, the cohorts were divided into two groups at the end of the model implementation study on a *post hoc* examination of data regarding intensity and frequency of services received. A correlation was made of the two groups to determine the educational outcomes the students achieved (i.e. GPA, academic progress, retention). Comparison analyses were also conducted on the differences within the cohort of students. Variables such as grades, class attendance, types of supports used, and the number of resources accessed on campus and in the community, and overall adjustment to college were used in comparison studies. Data were also collected from structured interviews conducted with each student participant. Information collected through the interviews included satisfaction with services, feedback concerning the delivery of services through the supported education model, technology that proved useful, and community resources that were effective.

A database of information collected on student participants has been created. The following elements were used to gather student data:

- Demographic characteristics of students served
- Accommodation and support needs provided by the University
- Community resources accessed
- Types of educational intervention strategies provided
- Frequency and intensity of services and supports provided
- Barriers to student retention and completion
- Student satisfaction with services and supports provided
- Student academic outcomes
- Educational interventions and strategies that contributed to academic success and student satisfaction.

Some of the results obtained from the study on the implementation of a supported education model at Virginia Commonwealth University included:

- Educational strategies that students found to be most effective were time management strategies, use of technology, self-advocacy strategies, specific study and test taking skills designed for the student, and practice sessions for passing clinical requirements.
- Students who received frequent and intensive services were able to achieve their educational goal(s) as identified in their Academic Support Plan. Outcomes achieved by students included passing a course or clinical, remaining in their program of studies at VCU, and passing state administered examinations.
- Students were more likely to use their university accommodations when combined with the services and supports provided through the supported education model.
- Students expressed a high level of satisfaction with the services and supports received through the model. Students stated that participating in the model enabled them to gain a better understanding of their accommodation needs and how it impacted their education. Increased exposure to technology programs and software was also extremely beneficial in assisting them to progress in their program of studies, as was the person-centered, student directed philosophy of the program which helped students to take responsibility for developing and implementing their educational support needs.

- Students who presented the most challenging support needs in the study were often those with multiple disabilities. These students had a number of life issues that needed to be addressed along with their educational support needs.
- Results from the study indicate that a supported education model can be a viable mechanism to address the educational needs of a specific population of students with disabilities enrolled in higher education (e.g. students who have fallen through the cracks, placed on academic probation, or are at risk of dropping out of college).

### ***Innovative Practices***

The VCU-RRTC Supported Education model was designed to assist students with disabilities in meeting their educational goals. The model components were built on the essential elements of supported education and included (1) the application of person centered planning techniques to the needs of students, (2) the use of services and supports that can be incorporated into the typical routines of campus life, and (3) the provision of services to help students successfully progress toward completion of their degree. The model not only addressed the academic needs of students, but also life skill issues, which impeded their ability to succeed academically. Student participants faced such issues as limited self-advocacy skills, medication difficulties, time management or organizational skills that had a serious impact on their progress in higher education.

### ***Implications of the Study***

The results of the study to determine the effectiveness of services and supports implemented through a supported education model reveal several implications for delivery of services on college campuses, supports and services for students with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders, and student performance and outcomes. Implications from the results of the study include:

- Study findings indicate that intensity and frequency of service and support use, access to technology, and student persistence are strong predictors of student performance and outcomes.
- Enhanced collaboration between university and community services are needed to insure that students with disabilities receive the needed services and supports to meet their educational needs.

- The fact that greater numbers of students with significant disabilities are entering postsecondary education will necessitate the creation of multiple approaches for service delivery by universities and colleges.

Further research will be required to validate the findings of this study. Additional studies on a larger sample of students with disabilities will also be necessary to the determination of the model's effectiveness and that of the services provided. Comparison data will be needed to determine the outcomes of students who receive services through a supported education model versus those who do not access the model. The model must also be tested in a variety of postsecondary settings including two and four year colleges.

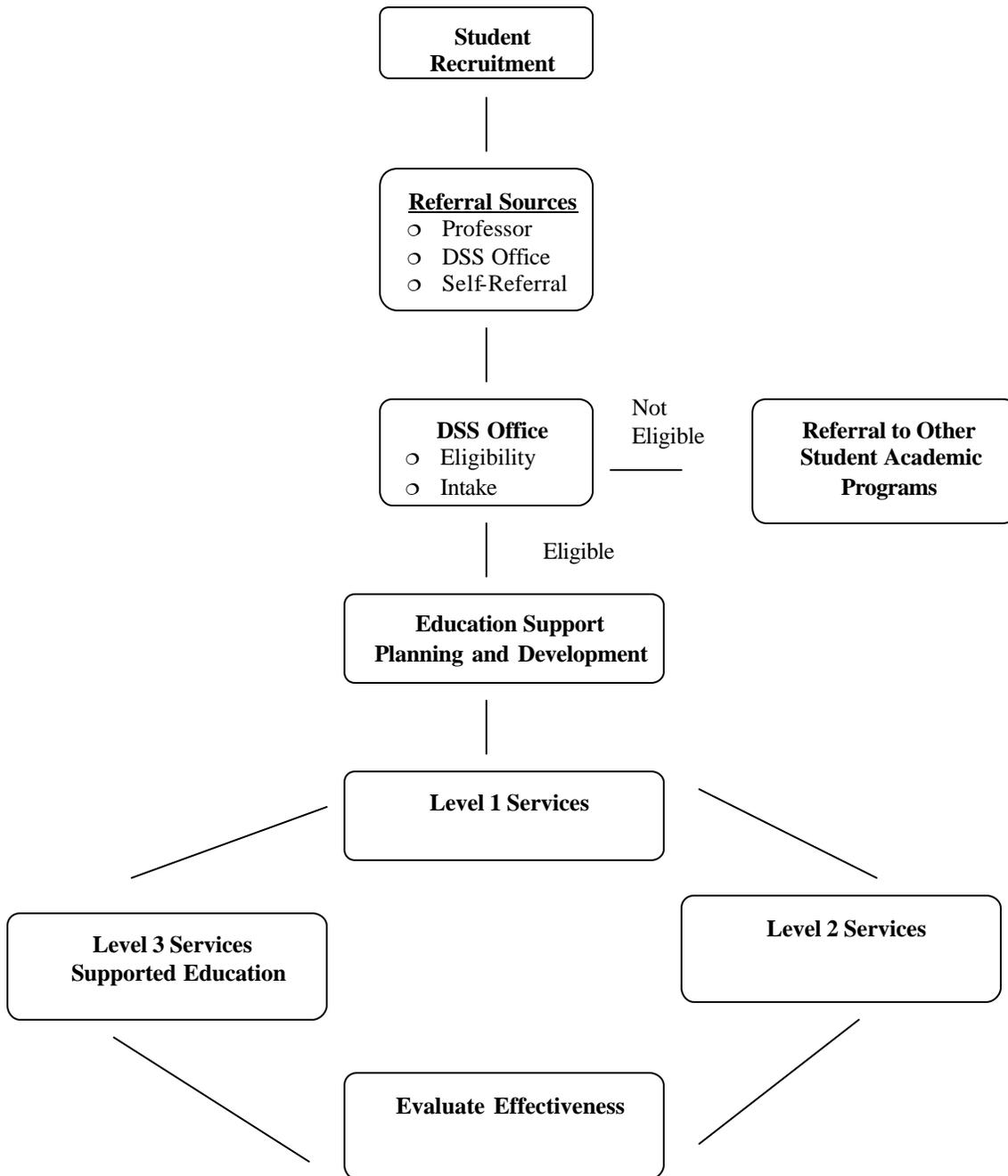
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### ***Conclusion***

Although the number of students with disabilities entering postsecondary education has increased, there issues and challenges that often prevent students from successfully completing their degree programs still remain. Understanding the range of educational supports needed, the specific accommodations appropriate for students, and the critical institutional structures are some of the key research areas that need to be addressed. The VCU-RRTC Supported Education Model implementation study for students with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders provides initial data results on the use of supported education within the continuum of services provided on a university campus, strategies and supports found to be effective by students, and implications for further study and research.

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# VCU Supported Education Model



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## Recommended Resources

VCU Professional Development Academy [www.students.vcu.edu/pda](http://www.students.vcu.edu/pda)