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*Research Briefing Paper:
Findings from the VCU Supported Education Model for
Students with Learning Disabilities and Attention Deficit Disorder*

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Nature of Problem Addressed

As a result of the increasing number students with disabilities entering post secondary education, disability support services offices across the nation are faced with providing more varied and specialized services to meet this increased demand. Disability support services cover a wide spectrum on the amount and type of support services offered and often services vary from campus to campus. 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; McGiore, Norlander, & Shaw, 1990).

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

academic obstacles and life skill issues (e.g. medications, personal assistance services, financial assistance) to overcome in order to successfully complete their education. Current supported education models that have been designed over the past decade have focused on student with psychiatric or attention deficit disorders (Loewen, 1993; Pettella, Tarnoczy, & Geller, 1996; Unger, 1998). Supported education is a consumer-driven, individualized support system utilizing community and university resources, and structures these resources to meet short term and long term goals of students (Cooper, 1993; Egnew, 1993; Unger, 1998). In particular, the supported education model structures services and supports around an individual's career choice, to enable students to work toward obtaining a degree and successfully entering his or her chosen career (Engew, 1998).

The supported education model helps to blend community and university

resources to provide a range of services and supports for students who may be in need of specialized services beyond the services available through a college's DSS Office. Regular contact between students and supported education staff is critical so that the services and supports provided are responsive to students' needs. Ongoing research is needed to obtain data on the effectiveness of this model for delivery of services, and what services and supports proved most helpful to students enabling them to progress through their program of study and remain in college.

Research Questions to Answer the Problem

1. What is the range of educational supports needed by students with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders to successfully complete their postsecondary education program?
2. What are the critical institutional structures that need to be in place in order to meet the educational needs of students with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders?
3. How effective is the delivery of services and supports through a supported education model?
4. What are the barriers for succeeding in a postsecondary environment as perceived by students with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders, and what strategies and accommodations do they believe work in overcoming these barriers?

Methods Used to Answer the Research Questions

Because of the individualized nature of this study, developing and implementing specific educational supports for students with learning disabilities and/or attention deficit disorders, the study required a method which captured the individualized nature of the supports provided, yet provided information on a group of students who received intensive educational assistance through a supported education model. Structured interviews of study participants were selected as the primary method for data collection information. This method was selected because of the richness and depth of the information collected from the students and provided an efficient method for collecting and analyzing data (Patton, 2002). Structured interviews also provide a standardized approach for gathering information from participants using different interviewers. Structured interviews provide an exact instrument for examination by others who will use the findings of the study, reduces variation among interviewers, and provides a format that facilitates the analysis of the findings (Patton, 2002).

A second method used to gather data is the development of detailed student profiles. These profiles were used to track student outcomes such as academic progress including grade point average, academic program, program status, matriculation, enrollment history, academic standing, retention, and program completion. The profiles also provide information on student support needs, accommodations provided, educational interventions provided, and student satisfaction. A database has

been developed with the following elements:

- Demographic characteristics of students served
- Accommodation and support needs provided through the university
- Types of educational intervention services and supports provided by the study
- Frequency and intensity of accommodations
- Barriers to student retention and program completion
- Student satisfaction with services provided through the study
- Student academic outcome information
- Educational interventions and strategies that contribute to academic success and student satisfaction

Design of the Study

The study was designed to provide intensive educational supports to an intact cohort of students with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders. During the 2001-2002 academic year, a cohort of 17 students participated in the study. The services were delivered through a supported education model as part of the Disability Services Office on campus. Students were recruited from both the academic and medical campuses at VCU. Once students were recruited, Academic Specialists, who were staff at the VCU-RRTC, began working with these students to identify their specific educational support needs. This information helped to develop a student profile on each participant and was used to develop his or her individualized Academic Support Plan. Based on the needs identified through the plan, the

student and Academic Specialist met or communicated by email to determine how the supports were being implemented and their effectiveness in helping the students.

To compare the results of the students, the cohort was divided between students who received intensive services from the study staff during the academic year and those who sought minimal assistance. Academic outcomes were compared between the two groups of students. Additionally, structured interviews were conducted with the students to determine the effectiveness of the supports and services provided.

Statistical Analysis

To compare the results of the students, the cohort was divided into two groups at the end of the academic year based on post hoc examination of data regarding intensity and frequency of services received. A comparison was made between 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, number of resources accessed on campus and in the community, and the overall adjustment to college were used in comparison studies. Case studies have also been developed from the Student Profile and Academic Support Plan to provide a more detailed and in-depth look at specific educational interventions that were provided.

Data was also collected from structured interviews conducted with

each participant. Information collected through the interviews included satisfaction with services, feedback concerning the program services and strategies provided, technology that proved useful, and community resources that were accessed.

Study Findings

Findings from the structured interviews with 10 study participants are the following.

- Students were highly satisfied with the services and supports provided through the program.
- Twelve out of the seventeen students were seen on an intensive basis (daily or weekly contact).
- Three students stated they remained at VCU as a result of the support received through the study.
- A third of the students used their university accommodations only after encouragement of study staff and structured with the services and supports received through the program.
- Students found the individualized nature of the program and exposure to technology to be very helpful.
- Access to needed technology and opportunities to try new technologies on campus are barriers for students with disabilities to fully utilize existing technology. The lack of financial assistance to purchase technology is also a significant barrier for these students.

- Students expressed a need for services provided through a supported education model in higher education.

Findings from the comparison of students within the cohort are the following:

- Students who received frequent and intensive services from the project had program outcomes such as passing a course or clinical, remaining at VCU or in their program of study, and changing majors after intensive supports and career exploration.
- Students who had infrequent contact with the project had outcomes such as remaining in their program of study, passing a course, academic probation, and academic dismissal.
- Students participating in the program consisted of 4 freshmen, 5 juniors, 1 senior, 5 graduate students, and 2 medical students.
- Educational strategies that were frequently used by students included time management, use of technology, self advocacy strategies, specific study strategies, and practice sessions for test taking and clinical requirements.

Overall findings from the study are:

- Students with disabilities in post secondary education still remain unaware of how their disability impacts their learning. Students are unable to articulate what changes are needed in their learning strategies or

accommodations to meet higher level learning in the post secondary settings.

- Students with disabilities experience difficulties in discussing their accommodation needs with faculty and staff.
- Preliminary 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.
- Students with disabilities do not fully access advising services or understand how to develop a course load that will meet their learning needs.
- Students who presented the most challenging support needs in the study were those with multiple disabilities. These students had learning and attention difficulties in addition to emotional issues.
- Initial findings indicate that a supported education model can be incorporated into the spectrum of services provided on a university campus. Coordination and collaboration between the study staff and the DSS office have resulted in the expansion and intensity of services provided to students with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders.

Implications for Further Study

Preliminary results indicate that a supported education model can successfully be implemented on the university level. Further research is needed on a larger group of individuals to determine the effectiveness of the model and the services provided. Additional research is needed to determine the impact of the model and services on a wider range of students with disabilities, since this study focused on students with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders.

Research efforts are also needed to compare students who received services through a supported education model versus those who use services primarily through the DSS office. Further research is needed to determine if students coming through a supported education model present different student profiles and support needs than students who primarily use DSS services.

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