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Effectiveness of Accommodations for Students with ADHD at UNO

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Abstract

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder which can impair ability to sustain attention, inhibit impulses, plan and organize, and complete tasks. These deficits can create barriers to academic success for students with ADHD. Accommodations are often offered to alleviate these disadvantages. However, current research has called into question the effectiveness of commonly offered accommodations for students with ADHD. The purpose of this study was to determine how helpful UNO students found these accommodations and how to better help this student population. The study surveyed 27 UNO students with ADHD on their learning problems, their experiences with the accommodations and why they may choose not to use them, and their comfort with their professors. Roughly 50% of respondents found the accommodations helpful but did not feel sufficiently supported at UNO. The results of this research can be used to aid professors in creating a more welcoming classroom to students with ADHD. Further research collecting assessment data are needed to determine if accommodations are helpful beyond just the student perspective.

Key words: ADHD, Accommodations, Higher Education

Effectiveness of Accommodations for Students with ADHD at UNO

ADHD, or Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, is a neurodevelopmental disorder that impacts a person's executive functions as well as a number of other abilities. Executive functions include organization and goal creating and completing abilities. People diagnosed with ADHD may experience hyperactivity and have difficulties with the following: sustaining attention, planning and managing time, working memory, inhibiting impulses, and completing tasks (Jansen et. al, 2017). ADHD will affect people in many areas of their lives. However, it can be an especially great obstacle in school performance as those who have the condition have an increased likelihood of dropping out of school, receiving lower grades or repeating classes in upper education (Pritchard et. al, 2016; Jansen et. al, 2017). About one out of eleven American youths aged four to seventeen are diagnosed with ADHD, and the number of students with the condition seeking higher education has increased (Pritchard et. al, 2016; Jansen et. al, 2017). One method to aid in school success for people diagnosed with ADHD is to provide accommodations.

Accommodations are considered an adjustment to standardized conditions provided to minimize the impairments of a person's disability (Pritchard et. al, 2016). Accommodations need to be selected specifically for each individual student to target the student's deficits. In order to verify that an accommodation is supporting a student in an area of weakness and not making the task simpler for them and therefore giving them an unfair advantage, the idea of a differential boost is considered. A differential boost is when disabled students have scores that have improved significantly more than the scores of nondisabled students. This is not the same as the disabled students' receiving better scores as a whole than nondisabled students. If a differential boost exists then the accommodation is assumed to have effectively mitigated the problem area for the disabled student, and so would not help nondisabled students who did not

have such deficits (Florell & Strait, 2020). Typical accommodations for people with ADHD may include extended time to complete an exam or assignment, reducing distractions in the environment, providing support in organization or supplying notes, among others (Harrison et. al, 2020).

Several of these accommodations have been examined and questioned on their efficacy and fairness in previous studies. As extended time is one of the most common accommodations offered, numerous studies have been conducted to determine its effectiveness. One study by Lovett and Leja (2015) examined the benefits of extended time on exams as they related to level of self-reported ADHD symptoms. College students' ADHD symptoms were measured, and a reading comprehension exam was given with a time limit of 10 minutes and then an extended time of 5 additional minutes. They found a correlation between higher self-reporting of ADHD symptoms and less benefit from extended time. A very recent study by Jansen et. al (2019) seems to corroborate the results of extended time not providing a sufficient differential boost in performance for college students with ADHD. The Jansen et. al (2019) study attempted to simulate an actual examination and used three time conditions of one hour, an hour and 20 minutes and an hour and a half. They did not observe a significant increase in correctly answered items for the ADHD group when compared with the typically developed control group.

A separate exam location was another commonly recommended accommodation with various studies testing its effectiveness. A study by Lovette et. al (2019) tested college students with and without ADHD in a private room with a proctor and in proctored group sessions. They also measured student's ADHD symptoms. They found that a separate exam location does not provide benefits to the nondisabled population, allowing it to meet one criterion for an adequate accommodation. Only 41% of ADHD students greatly benefited from the alternative exam

location and a small correlation was found between the severity of the self-reported ADHD symptoms and the beneficial effects of the accommodation. Another study by Weis and Beauchemin (2020) had college students with learning disabilities and/or ADHD and nondisabled students taking a high-stake Spanish exam in a private room or in a group setting. They found that the private room actually had resulted in significantly lower exam scores for students with learning disabilities and ADHD when compared with their nondisabled peers.

Due to these controversial and somewhat mixed results of these findings, more research needs to be conducted to determine how to address individual ADHD students' deficits. Considering the environment may be an important factor in observing ADHD symptoms. The study by Jansen et. al (2017) surveyed college students to determine the frequency of problems often associated with ADHD, the teaching methods in which these problems occurred most, and which accommodations students believed helped with their specific problems. ADHD students were found to experience more functioning problems than nondisabled peers and these occurred most often during what were considered classical teaching methods. There were diverse opinions about which accommodations students found effective for their problems.

Many of these studies were limited in their small population size, making replications imperative. As common accommodations offered have questionable efficacy, new solutions to better attend to ADHD problems should be considered. In order to determine what other methods may aid ADHD students' in mitigating their deficits, an understanding of those problems and the environments in which they occur can serve as a starting point. Expanding on the findings of Jansen et. al (2017), the aims of the present research was to verify the educational circumstances that resulted in the most difficulty for students with ADHD, observe which accommodations

students with ADHD felt were most effective, why they may have chosen not to use accommodations, and how the University could better support the needs of these students.

Methods

Participants

There were 27 respondents, all of whom had ADHD and were students at the University of Nebraska Omaha, a medium-sized public University. There were 19 female participants, 7 male participants and 1 non-binary participant. Only 4 of the 27 participants were of Spanish, Hispanic or Latino origin. The majority of respondents, 24 of 27, reported their race as white. There was one respondent who indicated their race as Asian, one who reported their race as American Indian/Native Alaskan, and one who indicated their race to include white, American Indian/Native Alaskan and other. The participants were at varying points in completing their degrees with 4 freshmen, 7 sophomores, 6 juniors and 10 seniors. The majority of participants majored in psychology. Specifically, 14 students reported a psychology major, 2 of which had a second major. There were 5 students who majored in biology, one with a double major. There were 5 students who chose health related majors (public health, speech pathology, sports medicine). There was 1 math major and 2 students with creative majors (performing arts, studio art). Of the 11 participants that elected to share their comorbid conditions, 9 of them reported having 2 or more cooccurring conditions. The most prominent comorbidities were mood disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder, and anxiety.

Due to the timeframe of the study, random sampling could not be used, and the survey was distributed using the most readily available methods. This resulted in unintentional targeting of certain student populations. The survey was uploaded to SONA, a site that allows students to find and participate in psychology research projects. The study was available for students to

submit their responses for 9 days, opening on November 2nd 2022 and closing in the evening of November 11th 2022. The survey was also distributed via the Instagram account of a friend.

Inclusionary criteria were being a UNO student and having ADHD. The description of the survey on SONA instructed that a diagnosis of ADHD was required for participation.

Participants completed the survey voluntarily and answered anonymously. Those who completed the survey on SONA earned extra credit towards one of their psychology classes. Participants who completed the survey through the link provided on the friend's Instagram account did not receive extra credit or other compensation.

Measures

An online survey was created using Qualtrics XM Survey Software. The survey consisted of 33 questions. The survey was a mix of simple yes/no questions, questions asking participants to rank their experiences using a 0-10 scale, questions that asked students to select one or more answers about their experiences, and open-ended questions (see Appendix for the full survey). The survey itself was developed using the study conducted in 2017 by Jansen D et. al as a main reference. The survey questions asked about demographic information, the students' experiences with specific problems in learning commonly faced by individuals with an ADHD diagnosis, under what circumstances those issues occurred, if they were offered specific accommodations, how they would rate the usefulness of each accommodation if they were used, why they chose not to use certain accommodations, and how they found their experience discussing accommodations with their teachers to be. Due to the wide variety of possible accommodations students could be offered and that students in other institutions have been previously offered, the accommodations that were asked about were narrowed down to commonly offered accommodations that were not already encompassed in common teaching strategies. The selected

accommodations discussed were extended time, separate testing location, and alternate examination format. These accommodations have been shown to be the ones most recommended to college students (Weis R et. al, 2019).

The Qualtrics program tabulated responses for the closed-ended questions, and the open-ended responses were coded and classified by the experimenter.

Results and Discussion

All participants reported having trouble with sustaining attention, as this is one of the defining symptoms of ADHD, this problem being most reported aligns with previous studies asking students about their inattention. Short term memory was reported as a problem for 85% of respondents. Setting educational priorities was reported as a problem for 74% of respondents. Planning and organizing was reported as a problem for only 52% of respondents.

After reporting whether they experienced each of the above problems, participants were presented with a list of learning contexts and asked to select all the contexts during which the problem occurred. Contexts included the following: peer/self-evaluation, writing a paper, open notes exam, no notes used in exam, oral exam, multiple choice exam, creation of a portfolio, during class lecture, and reading the course materials/other written texts.

For the problem of sustaining attention, all of the contexts were selected by at least 26% of the respondents. The contexts in which problems in sustaining attention occurred the most were no note exams, reading course material, writing a paper, and during class lecture, being selected by 89%, 85%, 81%, and 78% of participants respectively. Being able to focus attention may be more of an issue during exams, reading course material, writing a paper and class lecture because the student is expected to pay attention to one subject which may not interest them, for an extended period of time. As exams are often time sensitive, having drifting attention can

result in the student not being able to complete all of the questions, which is why extended time and separate exam location are often provided as accommodations to offset the student spending exam time distracted by other things. Some course texts can be long and dense, requiring the student to concentrate or reread the material to have a better grasp of the subject. Having a shorter attentional span can result in the student taking longer to read their necessary course material. During the writing process a student has to remain focused on the subject of their paper, and distractibility or fleeting attention can result in the student needing to implement working in more sessions to produce the final piece. Lecture can be less engaging as well if students are not asked for their input and must remain quiet and seated the whole time.

The problem of short-term memory occurred most during no note exams, class lecture, and reading course material. All of the above contexts were selected by 78% of respondents who reported short term memory as a problem. A weaker short-term memory can affect reading and exam taking as a student may read a paragraph or an exam question and not remember all of the important information, forcing them to reread the text or the question. Depending on the style and speed of the lecturer, a student may struggle to recall all of the points the lecturer states due to limited memory capacity.

The problem of setting educational priorities occurred most frequently during writing a paper and reading course material, with both equally reported by 95% of the participants who were affected by this problem. Lecture was also reported by 70% of the affected participants. As writing a paper is less time sensitive and often has a deadline weeks later, students may be more inclined to deprioritize this assignment in favor of other things. Students may also not prioritize reading if they find it too time consuming, uninteresting, or unnecessary for their learning. If a

student can learn the material through other methods, a student may not prioritize attending lecture.

For the problem of planning and organizing, all of the affected students reported that they experienced this problem while writing a paper, and 71% reported reading the course material as the second most common context in which this problem was experienced. The writing process involves planning one's argument and organizing how and when the evidence is presented. A student may also need to plan when they will work on their paper and organize all the necessary information they will use to draft the paper. A student may need to plan when they will dedicate time to reading course materials or they may need to organize how they take notes as they read.

After determining the participants' problem areas, questions about the accommodations of extended time, a separate exam location, and an alternative exam were posed. Only 33% of students had extended time as part of their accommodations. It is possible that not all participants in the survey actually sought out accommodations with UNO accessibility services or elected not to include this accommodation in their plan.

Only 6 of the 9 students were offered extended time, and all who were offered chose to use the extended time. It is possible that participants that had extended time as part of their accommodation plan forgot or chose not to tell their professors that they had this accommodation, explaining why some were not able to use it.

There were 21 respondents who rated how helpful they found their experience using extended time to be or how helpful they anticipated the use of extended time would be had they used this accommodation. Most respondents felt that extended time was or would be very helpful, with 71% rating it at 7 or greater on a scale of 0-10. Only 20% found it moderately helpful, rating it between 4 and 6, and 9% of respondents found it not very helpful, rating it

between 0 and 3. The majority of respondents reporting extended time to be helpful confirms previous research that indicated students with ADHD tend to believe extended time is a helpful accommodation (Jansen et. al, 2019).

When asked to select why participants elected not to use extended time all of the responses (fear of stigmatization, desire to succeed without additional help, belief that the accommodation would not be helpful, not informed about accommodation) were selected by at least 5 respondents. A desire to succeed without additional help was selected the most as it was chosen by 9 respondents. Neurotypical students have been shown to also benefit from extended time, sometimes even more than students with ADHD (Pritchard et. al, 2016). Students with ADHD may be aware that their typically developed peers can benefit from extended time, thus, seeing this accommodation as an unfair advantage and resulting in more students desiring to succeed without it.

For the accommodation of a separate exam location, 33% of respondents had this accommodation as part of their accommodation plan. Only 7 of the 9 respondents were offered a separate exam location, and only 5 students chose to take their exam at a separate location. As with the extended time accommodation, students may have not sought out accommodations at all, chosen not to include separate exam location as part of their plan, or chosen not to communicate with their professors about this accommodation.

Beliefs about the effectiveness of a separate exam location were more split. Of the 20 students who ranked the helpfulness of a separate exam location from 0-10, 45% believed it to be very helpful with a rating of 7 or greater, 30% believe it to not be very helpful with ratings between 0 and 3, and 25% believed it to be moderately helpful with ratings between 4 and 6. These results demonstrate the heterogeneity of the effects of accommodations frequently seen in

ADHD populations. It has been observed previously that some individuals do significantly benefit from the separate exam location accommodation, while others do not at all, and others still are hindered by it (Lovett et. al, 2019).

When asked why participants chose not to take their exams at a separate location, the most prominent reason selected by participants was believing that this accommodation would not be very helpful, being selected by 7 participants.

For the accommodation of an alternative exam, only 1 respondent of the 27 total reported having this accommodation as part of their accommodation plan. They did report being offered the accommodation, but they did not report using it. It is likely that students were not made aware of this accommodation, resulting in few having it in their accommodation plan.

Only 16 respondents rated how effective they believed an alternative exam would be. Half of those respondents believed that an alternative exam would be very helpful, rating it a 7 or greater, 31% believed it would be moderately helpful with ratings between 4 and 6, and 19% did not believe it would be very helpful with ratings between 0 and 3.

When asked why respondents would choose not to take an alternative exam, the most selected reason was that the respondent was not informed about the accommodation, being selected by 11 respondents.

Finally, the participants were asked about their experiences at UNO and invited to share suggestions to better support them. There were 23 respondents who rated how supported they felt at UNO on a 0-10 scale. There were an equal number of participants (39%) who felt very well supported by UNO (gave a rating of 7 or greater) as participants who felt moderately well supported by UNO (gave a rating between 4-6). Unfortunately, the remaining 22% did not feel very well supported by UNO and gave ratings between 0 and 3.

Of the total 27 respondents, half (14) proposed suggestions for other accommodations. The most common of which were more leniency on deadlines for assignments, use of different course materials that are easier for ADHD students to learn from, and lecture accommodations such as taking breaks. These responses indicate that students desire more support beyond just testing accommodations.

When asked if participants felt comfortable talking to their professors about their accommodations, a majority of participants indicated that they did not. There were 26 responses and 62% of respondents reported that they did not feel comfortable talking to their professors about accommodations.

There were 20 responses discussing what would make participants more comfortable talking to their professors, 85% of the responses mentioned professors with friendly dispositions who would talk about accommodations themselves or remind students of their willingness to help without singling people out. Professors who did not appear strict and were understanding of mental health also were noted to increase comfortability. With these responses in mind, it seems that the respondents at UNO want to be understood by their teachers and not made to feel like a burden when they seek help. Professors who are aware of the accommodations students with ADHD may need may help students find accommodations that work for them and choose to use them without as much fear.

Conclusions

As found in previous studies, ADHD students struggle in a variety of academic contexts due to symptoms associated with ADHD. While not the most popular learning context for any of the individual problems, reading course material was always selected by at least 70% of participants who experienced the problems of sustaining attention, short term memory, setting

educational priorities, and planning and organizing. Writing a paper and attending class lecture were popular learning contexts in which three of the four problems occurred as well. These learning contexts fall into the category of classical teaching methods and align with the observations of Jansen et. al (2017). This provides merit to observing the effects of alternative teaching styles on presentation of ADHD symptoms/learning problems.

Participants' beliefs about the effectiveness of the three accommodations of extended time, separate exam location, and an alternate exam varied. At least 50% of the participants who rated the effectiveness of these accommodations believed they could be very helpful. This heterogeneity of accommodation effectiveness confirms the need for accommodation plans to be personalized to the student and not to rely solely on the student's diagnosis.

Participants rejected use of certain accommodations for several reasons. However, there may be a need for improved awareness of available accommodations as several respondents noted that they were not informed about the accommodations in the survey. More information of the importance of accommodations can also reduce stigmatization. The implementation of interventions such as training in organizational skills may also help students who find accommodations unhelpful. The study by Harrison et. al (2020) observed that interventions benefited students after they were taught them, whereas students receiving accommodations still struggled with their deficits if accommodations were removed.

While some respondents felt supported with their accommodations at UNO, others did not, and many respondents were not comfortable approaching their teachers about their accommodations. This indicates that the university has areas it can improve upon. Respondents indicated that professors who seemed friendly, understanding about mental health, and open to helping their students increased comfortability. Professors may use these results to encourage

their students to approach them to discuss their disabilities and unique academic struggles or needs. Professors may also consider implementing lecture breaks and being lenient or understanding of late assignments, as these methods were proposed to help students with ADHD.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. One limitation was the small sample size due to the interest in a population with a specific diagnosis—ADHD. Even one participant's response can greatly alter the data. This affirms the necessity for replication. Another limitation is that ADHD frequently is comorbid with other conditions, which was the case for 11 respondents who shared their other diagnoses. There was no way to determine whether respondents received additional accommodations due to these comorbid conditions. These additional diagnoses could also result in increased difficulties that may have affected the perceived usefulness of the accommodations. There was also no consideration for medication status, previous treatments or interventions that may have affected whether or not the participants still needed accommodations to achieve equal access to the material. Only three accommodations were examined and all focused on support in exams. Observing the effectiveness of other accommodations that aid students in non-exam settings may be useful in determining what accommodations can be provided. This study also did not collect quantitative exam data, so effectiveness is based solely on the participants' self-reported beliefs. Additional studies should be conducted using experimental procedure and collecting exam data to verify if ADHD students experience a differential boost to their performances that can be attributed to their accommodations.

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Appendix A

Accommodations

Start of Block: Default Question Block

How do you describe yourself?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Non-binary / third gender (3)
- Prefer to self-describe (4) _____
- Prefer not to say (5)

Are you of Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino origin?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be:

- White (1)
- Black or African American (2)

- American Indian or Alaska Native (3)
- Asian (4)
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (5)
- Other (6) _____

What year of college are you?

- Freshman (1)
- Sophomore (2)
- Junior (3)
- Senior (4)

What is your major?

Do you have any additional diagnoses in addition to ADHD? Please skip this question if you do not wish to provide this information

I experience problems with sustaining attention regularly

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Please check all contexts in which you experienced difficulty sustaining attention

- Peer/self evaluation (1)
- Writing a paper (2)
- Open notes exam (3)
- No notes used in exam (4)
- Oral exam (5)
- Multiple choice exam (6)

- Creation of portfolio (7)
- During class lecture (8)
- Reading the course materials/other written text (9)
- Other (10) _____
- I do not experience the above problem (11)

I have difficulties with setting educational priorities

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Please check all contexts in which you experience difficulty with setting educational priorities

- Peer/self evaluation (1)
- Writing a paper (2)
- Open notes exam (3)
- No notes used in exam (4)
- Oral exam (5)

- Multiple choice exam (6)
- Creation of portfolio (7)
- During class lecture (8)
- Reading the course materials/other written text (9)
- Other (10) _____
- I do not experience the above problem (11)

I have problems with my short-term/working memory or I am frequently forgetful during class activities

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Please check all contexts in which you experience difficulty with short-term memory/forgetfulness

- Peer/self evaluation (1)
- Writing a paper (2)
- Open notes exam (3)

- No notes used in exam (4)
- Oral exam (5)
- Multiple choice exam (6)
- Creation of portfolio (7)
- During class lecture (8)
- Reading the course materials/other written text (9)
- Other (10) _____
- I do not experience the above problem (11)

I have difficulty planning and organizing

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Please check all contexts in which you experience difficulty with planning and organizing

- Peer/self evaluation (1)
- Writing a paper (2)

- Open notes exam (3)
- No notes used in exam (4)
- Oral exam (5)
- Multiple choice exam (6)
- Creation of portfolio (7)
- During class lecture (8)
- Reading the class materials/other written text (9)
- Other (10) _____
- I do not experience the above problem (11)

Was extended time on exams one of your accommodations?

- No (1)
- Yes (2)

If you said yes to the above question, were you offered extended time on exams?

- No (1)

Yes (2)

If you said yes to the above question, did you choose to use the extended time on exams?

No (1)

Yes (2)

If you used extended time on exams, please rate how helpful it was on a 0-10 scale

If you did not use the extended time on exams, please rate how helpful you assume it would be if you had used it

0 (0)

1 (1)

2 (2)

3 (3)

4 (4)

5 (5)

6 (6)

7 (7)

- 8 (8)
- 9 (9)
- 10 (10)

If you chose not to use extended time on exams, why?

- Fear of stigmatization (1)
- Desire to succeed without additional help (2)
- Not informed about the accommodation (3)
- Did not think it would be helpful (4)
- Not applicable/I used the accommodation (5)
- Other (6) _____

Was the ability to take the exam at a separate location one of your accommodations?

- No (1)
- Yes (2)

If you said yes to the above question, were you offered the ability to take the exam at a separate location?

- No (1)
- Yes (2)

If you said yes to the above question, did you choose to take exams at a separate location?

- No (1)
- Yes (2)

If you took exams at a separate location, please rate how helpful it was on a 0-10 scale

If you did not take exams at a separate location, please rate how helpful you assume it would have been

- 0 (0)
- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)

- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 (9)
- 10 (10)

If you chose not to take exams at a separate location, why?

- Fear of stigmatization (1)
- Desire to succeed without additional help (2)
- Not informed about the accommodation (3)
- Did not think it would be helpful (4)
- Not applicable/I used the accommodation (5)
- Other (6) _____

Was an alternative exam format one of your accommodations?

- No (1)

Yes (2)

If you said yes to the above question, were you offered an alternative exam format?

No (1)

Yes (2)

If you said yes to the above question, did you choose to take an alternative exam?

No (1)

Yes (2)

If you chose to take an alternative exam format, please rate how helpful it was on a 0-10 scale

If you did not take an alternative exam format, please rate how helpful you assume it would have been

0 (0)

1 (1)

- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 (9)
- 10 (10)

If you chose not to take an alternative exam format, why?

- Fear of stigmatization (1)
- Desire to succeed without additional help (2)
- Not informed about the accommodation (3)
- Did not think it would be helpful (4)
- Not applicable/I used the accommodation (5)
- Other (6) _____

On a scale of 0-10, how helpful has UNO been in supporting your learning with accommodations?

- 0 (0)
- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 (9)
- 10 (10)

What other accommodations do you think would be helpful?

Did you generally feel comfortable talking to your professors about your accommodations/your learning needs?

- No (1)
- Yes (2)

What are some characteristics of a class or a teacher that make you more or less comfortable talking to your professor about your accommodations/learning needs?
