Making the Invisible, Visible: a Guide for Structuring Support for Students with Invisible Disabilities Into Courses

Introduction

Over the course of my university degree, I noticed many changes in myself as a person and as a student. It was during the pandemic that I noticed the most change in myself and my fellow students, and these changes were mostly negative. When school completely changed and transitioned to an online environment, I began to wonder if something was seriously wrong with me; I couldn't complete anything on time, I couldn't follow a schedule, I felt like I couldn't retain anything from class. These struggles led me to seek out the information and support that eventually led me to my ADHD diagnosis. After receiving my diagnosis, I continued to research ADHD, the associated barriers to education, and supports for students with ADHD. This research then led to me wonder about what it would look like to truly support and accommodate neurodivergent students in the university setting and if there was a way to entirely remove any barrier to education students with ADHD may face. Essentially, I was wondering, is there a way that course could be designed so well that students with ADHD would not need academic accommodations and students who are not yet diagnosed or do not have the language to ask for accommodations would be able to prioritize meaningfully participating in and enjoying the course instead of feeling burnout, anxious and frustrated. I set out on this project to see if I could come up with a set of guidelines that would make such a course not only a possibility, but the new norm at Carleton.

Research Questions & Objectives

I set out to answer three questions using a literature review and focus group. Those questions were,

1. What is known about pandemic learning loss in general, and how has it disproportionately impacted students with ADHD & related invisible disabilities?

2. What are the existing barriers to education students with ADHD & related invisible disabilities are experiencing and how have they changed over the pandemic?

3. In which practices, systems, and structures do we see ableism perpetuated (even inadvertently) within universities? What specific steps can Carleton take to overcome this?

My objective upon answering these questions was to create a guide informed by real Carleton neurodivergent student's lived experiences explaining how to intentionally remove barriers for these students into their curriculums and design a course that encourages critical engagement with the material in a compassionate environment.

Methodology

This project used a combination of a literature review and focus groups comprised of current and former students to answer the research questions.

The focus groups were conducted after review and clearance from Carleton's research ethics board (CUREB-A). Participants were recruited via posters, email/online invitation, and snowball sampling. All participants had to be over the age of 18, be a current or former Carleton student, and had to have an ADHD diagnoses or experience symptoms of ADHD. After recruitment, participants signed consent forms and then filled out a brief survey using Qualtrics to collect demographic information as well as information about their ADHD symptoms and/or diagnosis. Participants then met in 4 focus groups of 1-4 people during July 2023 to discuss their experiences as Carleton students with ADHD. The focus groups were conducted via zoom and were audio recorded and transcribed. All responses have been anonymized using pseudonyms.

Key Findings and Their Implications

One prevailing theme that emerged from participants across various focus groups was the importance of fostering a sense of community and belonging within the academic setting. Students reported feeling seen, heard, and accepted when they were able to share their experiences with others. This emphasizes the significance of building personal connections and encouraging dialogue among students. The implication here is that courses that prioritize community-building and provide opportunities for students to share their experiences might be particularly beneficial for those with ADHD. Visual engagement also emerged as a prominent factor in aiding the learning process for students with ADHD. Participants across all groups expressed a preference for visual aids, such as PowerPoint presentations and slide shows, over plain verbal lectures. Materials (whether they be presented in class or outside of class time) which incorporated images, varied fonts, and diagrams were found to be more conducive to understanding.

Time management and task completion were areas of concern for participants. While deadlines were crucial for maintaining focus, handling multiple assignments within a short

timeframe proved overwhelming. Many participants shared the sentiment that initiating tasks was the most challenging part, but once started, their ability to hyperfocus often kicked in, aiding productivity. Diverse assessment methods were highlighted as beneficial for accommodating different strengths and preferences. Interactive components like group discussions and engaging activities were lauded for their ability to maintain interest and increase participation. Real-world applications and examples were also valued by many participants, underlining the importance of practical relevance in the learning process.

Directions for Future Research

I created the following online guide to be a useful tool for instructors right here at Carleton to use to help them to design their courses in a way that supports the unique learning needs of students with ADHD and related invisible disabilities. My aim with this project is to address the struggles often faced by students with ADHD and other neurodivergent conditions by advocating for UID and considerate instructional practices.

It's important to note that this guide isn't solely about improving averages or grades, or even encouraging students to "like" their professors more. Instead, it focuses on making learning a joyful and fulfilling experience and boosting accessibility for all students. Even neurotypical students can benefit from implementing these best practices outlined in this guide, as they aim to encourage student growth, engagement, and a genuine understanding of course material. The best practices listed are not exclusive to students with ADHD, but they are informed by research on ADHD and come from the perspective of a researcher with ADHD.

Further research should apply a similar methodology to other post-secondary institutions in order to continue to build knowledge and spread awareness of best practices for teaching and supporting adult neurodivergent students in the context of the ongoing pandemic.

To view the guide, follow this link:

https://cuportfolio.carleton.ca/view/view.php?t=e0d212b3a1bbab86ef2b