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Adults with ADD or ADHD and Their Perceptions of Distance Learning: A Plan for Future Research

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Attention Deficit Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder are becoming more commonly recognized in adults, though it used to be held as an adolescent issue. Many people still believe these disorders only affect young people, but “experts estimate that as many as one third of adolescents who have been diagnosed with ADHD will carry the disorder with them into adulthood.” (ADHD Among College Students, n.d.) Some symptoms of ADD and ADHD are: difficulty paying attention, difficulty concentrating, extreme levels of activity, and being very easily distracted. These disorders in adults affect relationships and can cause problems at work and in school. College students with ADHD appear to be at higher than average risk for academic underachievement relative to their non-ADHD counterparts. (College Students with ADHD, n.d.)

After having several distance learning courses, and interviewing some adults with Attention Deficit Disorder, I began considering how the common symptoms of adult learners with ADD and ADHD might be more manageable in a distance learning environment. One man I interviewed struggles with college courses because he can’t hold still and continue to focus on the lesson after about 30 minutes in class. This leaves nearly one half of the lecture content lost to him. My initial assumptions are that adults with ADD or ADHD will favor distance-learning courses due to the flexibility of the learning time and pace, and also due to the flexibility of the learning environment.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to explore attitudes and perceptions of adults with ADD or ADHD on distance learning.

Research Questions

How do adults with Attention Deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder at Washington State four year institutions of higher education perceive distance-learning courses?

Research Design

This is a mixed, but primarily qualitative, inductive study.

Data-Collection Procedures

This study is intended to understand adults’ with ADD and ADHD’s perceptions of distance learning. A primarily open ended survey will be developed to collect data for evaluation. A survey will allow for a greater sampling and more robust findings than an interview method. Age and gender data will be collected to allow for later comparison and coding of data.

Recent studies suggest that ADHD affects approximately 2 percent to 4 percent of the college population. (College Students with ADHD, n.d.) In 2009 there were 109,599 students enrolled in Washington’s six four-year public institutions of higher education. (Chapter 4:, n.d.) The estimated population of adults with ADD and ADHD enrolled in these colleges in Washington is 2191-4382 people. A sampling of 500 would represent approximately 11.2 – 22.8% of the population. To handle a sampling of this size, the survey will remain brief with less than 5 numerical or Likert scale responses, and less than 3 open-ended questions. This will hopefully also encourage a greater number of participants.

All six of the public four year institutions of higher education in the state of Washington are required to offer special services to adult learners with ADD and ADHD. I will recruit participants through these departments. Surveys will be distributed through each college’s service program for students with disabilities, following an introduction, purpose, and rationale statement to the director of the program. Upon approval of survey distribution, instructions for online and paper option surveys will be sent to the Disability Student Services Director.

The participant’s identities and confidentiality will be protected. The survey is anonymous and will be sent from me, to the DSS departments, then to the participants online. Only participant numbers will be linked to the surveys, not their names or other identifiers.

The hypothesis has been deferred in order to explore perceptions about the subject by the participants. The survey will include 3 demographic questions: age, gender, and college. These can be used later for comparison analyses such as female versus male perceptions, and if age indicates a difference. It may also be valuable to consider perceptions based on the college attended because different colleges have different resources for students with ADD and ADHD, and they also have different levels of distance learning. If students at college A really favor DL, and students at college B strongly dislike it, it would be worth investigating the DL programs at that university to see if they are correlated. Students will also be asked whether or not they have taken a distance learning class, and asked to rate on a Likert Scale the effectiveness of the education from that class. The remaining questions will be open ended and inquire about their perceptions of distance learning.

Data-Analysis Procedures

Coding and categorizing of data will begin with the first survey collected and continue until the final report of findings is written. Demographic data will be analyzed and grouped for possible comparisons of perceptions. The data will be organized into an excel spreadsheet, with each response having a numerical code connected to each response. In the quantitative data, I will be looking for correlations among the data. Specifically, whether or not the following are correlated:

- Institution and if they have taken DL course/s.
- Age and if they have taken DL course/s.
- Gender and if they have taken DL course/s
- Institution and perception of DL
- Age and perception of DL
- Gender and perception of DL
- If taken DL and perception of DL

A printed copy of the qualitative data will be cut up to enable sorting and resorting into categories, the numerical codes enable the analyzer to know which responses came from which survey if necessary. All manipulation of the data will be done from copies; the actual surveys will be kept unaltered in their original form. Notes will be made throughout the coding process, both on copies of the surveys, and collectively in a notebook.

Summary

This study will attempt to describe the patterns and perspectives of college adults with Attention Deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder on Distance Learning. The goal is to discover if adults with ADD or ADHD favor distance learning, and if so, how can this research be used to improve academic success for this population.

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