

The Washington Post

Why so many bright kids fail to launch in college

By Valerie Strauss

November 3, 2010

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By MacLean Gander

It's November, and for many new college students the initial excitement of new surroundings, new friends, and life on campus has begun to head south, into the reality of papers not finished, tests with failing grades, and an attendance pattern that leaves little hope of catching up. For many, it will be their first experience of academic failure—and it may leave them and their parents scrambling for what to do next, once the fall semester grades finally come in.

Andy's story is a typical one. Good grades and a standout role on the soccer team at an elite Washington D.C. school gave him a ticket to one of the best private colleges in the Northeast.

But the new demands of college work, coupled with out-of-class distractions and the demanding requirements of college sports quickly translated to failing grades—and lost him his place on the team. His first semester was a washout, and by the time mid-semester grades came in last spring, it was clear that college just wasn't working for him. He withdrew before he could fail again.

Students like Andy were often tops in their high school classes and earned high SAT scores. In college, they are working hard but they just can't seem to get any traction. They may struggle to wake up in time for class, leave long-term assignments until it is too late, and neglect to complete written work without the kinds of reminders and cues that their parents used to provide. Unlike high school, where performance is closely tracked and notice is quickly taken, it may not be until the very end of the semester that the final reckoning comes due—failing grades and academic probation or suspension.

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These are not isolated cases. Nationwide, there is a large and growing group of bright kids whose brains aren't wired right for a demanding college routine. The strategies and supports that worked in high school when they were living at home are not adequate to the new demands that college places on the executive functions of the brain.

According to current theories of the brain, [executive functions](#) are located in areas of the prefrontal cortex, and they serve as a kind of orchestra conductor, regulating other areas that control planning, goal-setting, language production, and motor activity. Often unconscious, they operate beyond the control of will and motivation—even though the behavior that results when they fail to operate effectively is often judged in moral terms.

Researchers believe that executive function capabilities vary widely, and many also believe that in about 10 percent of cases the difficulties are severe enough to be classified as [Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder](#) (AD/HD), a learning difference that is increasingly seen as lying in the self-regulation systems of the brain. But even those not having an AD/HD diagnosis can and do have significant challenges, especially in a demanding academic environment.

Unfortunately, colleges have not yet learned how to deal with the mismatch between the ways some students' executive systems have developed and successful management of college coursework.

Even the best college support systems are often inadequate to the challenge, and the number of students who slip through the cracks is very high. More important, even students who manage to muddle through by getting extra help from instructors may still not develop the kinds of executive strategies essential to success in the workplace.

Psychiatrists and other physicians can prescribe medications that have positive effects, although many students report that meds also carry a cost. I would rather see more colleges address the problem directly by working directly with students to develop [self-management](#) and academic success techniques. It works beautifully here, where students learn to develop strategies to use their strengths and overcome their challenges.

Andy's at [Landmark College](#) now, taking first-year courses and doing well in them. In fact, every year, about half of the students who come to Landmark College have failed at other postsecondary institutions, including some of the most selective colleges in the country.

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Their stories are nearly always the same as Andy's: good grades in high school, good SAT scores, and a failure to launch when it came to the new demands of college work. By learning to master self-management strategies, these same students, like Andy, often go on to achieve academically and take their place in the world feeling a sense of pride in their accomplishment.

Ours is a special mission, but any institution can emulate what we do, with sufficient resources. The Obama Administration has placed great emphasis on boosting access to college and [college graduation rates](#), in part by using stimulus money to increase college access for students from low-income families. This is certainly money well spent.

At the same time, the question of how to address college completion rates is still far from settled. Looking at the challenge of bright students with executive function challenges may be equally important. Perhaps some of the stimulus money should be used to improve results for this cohort, which numbers in the tens of thousands. Perhaps state and local funding can be identified.

Unless and until we address the causes that lead to one out of two students dropping out before receiving a degree, opening higher education's doors wider may be an empty victory.

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