

How educational therapy can help universities and students succeed

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By Marion Marshall May 28, 2024



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<https://www.ndnu.edu/what-is-educational-therapy-and-how-does-it-work/>

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The field of educational therapy has been gaining more visibility in recent years, with articles in major publications such as *The Wall Street Journal* spotlighting the growing field. While often confused with related yet different terms such as psychotherapy and educational psychology, educational therapy has been helping neurotypical and neurodiverse students manage learning challenges, build on their strengths, advocate for themselves and succeed academically for decades.

Presently, it is mainly associated with K12 education since most students who are diagnosed as having learning differences are diagnosed in their primary school years. It would benefit institutions to understand how educational therapy would benefit them and the students they serve and consider how to integrate it into their existing infrastructures.

Educational therapy in a higher ed context

The skills that students learn while working with educational therapists are durable, but the transition from secondary school to higher education presents new challenges for many students. One challenge has to do with the lack of built-in institutional support in higher education settings. When students who have received support during elementary or secondary school get to college, however, it is up to them to go to the Disability Support Services (DSS) office and self-disclose that they have a learning difference, upon which the DSS office can provide certain accommodations such as extra time for taking tests, audiobooks to supplement written books or note-takers who take notes on behalf of students during lectures.



When students reach the college level, they are covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act, but they may feel that they are “all grown up now” and wish to do everything on their own. Either that, or they might feel they’ve outgrown the challenges they experienced in elementary school or high school. Whatever the reasons, it is very common for students not to disclose that they have learning differences, at least initially. There isn’t much that can be done in this case since their families can’t act on their behalf as they might have at the K12 level.

There are also students with learning differences who are never formally identified as such. Many of them manage to do well throughout their K12 years through a combination of their innate cognitive strengths and whatever coping methods they’ve developed themselves over the years. Moreover, at the K12 level, classes and schedules tend to be highly prescribed and consistent day to day. This changes dramatically in college where one chooses the courses within designated requirements and schedules can be highly varied.

Integrating educational therapy into existing structures

Research shows that students are more likely to drop out [if they are struggling academically](#), which is why it’s in institutions’ interests to support students in every way they can. However, the traditional model for assisting students who are struggling at the higher education level revolves around tutoring, writing centers and the aforementioned DSS offices which can provide certain accommodations but aren’t designed to teach students effective learning strategies.

Fortunately, there are ways to integrate educational therapy into the existing support systems that universities already have in place. One way, of course, is to actually hire an educational therapist (ET) to be part of the staff of the academic support center or tutoring center. Students who do not respond readily to traditional tutoring could then be referred to the ET who could individually work with them to see precisely why they are struggling and intervene with specific learning strategies or executive functioning coaching to achieve success.

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In situations where actually hiring educational therapists may not be possible, there are ways of raising the overall awareness and understanding of neurodiversity among faculty and staff. One approach is to temporarily bring in one or more educational therapists to provide training on additional learning strategies to the tutoring center staff. This will not turn tutors into educational therapists but may help them sense when and why a student may not be responding well to conventional tutoring approaches.

Many universities also have Centers for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) which are geared towards supporting and enhancing the technology and pedagogical skills of faculty members. Again, the goal wouldn’t be to have professors act as educational therapists but rather to equip them with better awareness of the types of learning challenges that students may face. A professor equipped with this knowledge may be more likely to reach out to struggling students in sensitive and respectful ways instead of assuming that the students are simply being lazy or unmotivated.

What all this means is that university administrators shouldn't feel that educational therapy is an all-or-nothing affair. As mentioned, even if educational therapists can't be hired as full-time staff, they can be invited to provide short-term professional development and training for staff and faculty. If resources are limited, universities can start small with one department or team at a time. Integrating any of the knowledge and skills that educational therapy has to offer, at any scale, is only going to help. When it comes to educational therapy, even a little bit can go a long way.