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College Students with “Hidden” Disabilities

The Freshman Survey Fall 2010

The 2010 freshman norms are based on the responses of 201,818 first-time, full-time, first-year students at 279 of the nation’s baccalaureate colleges and universities. The data have been statistically adjusted to reflect the responses of the 1.5 million first-time, full-time students entering four-year college and universities as first-year students in 2010. This brief expands on the Students with ADHD and other “Hidden” Disabilities section originally published in the “American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2010.”

The first wave of students educated under the mandates of the 1990 American with Disabilities Act (ADA) is currently arriving on campus (Wolf, 2001). In 2010 we updated our disability status question to reflect the growing attention that is being devoted to serving college students with “hidden” disabilities such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and psychological disorders. More students identified as having ADHD (5.0%) or a psychological disorder (3.8%) than any other disability/condition (See Table 1). Learning disabilities (2.9%), the other “hidden” condition, was the third most identified disability among students. As we noted with 2008 American Freshman Report, the percentage of students beginning college with a learning disability has steadily increased since we introduced the disability status question in 1983.

Among these “hidden” disabilities, ADHD and learning disabilities are

more common among men than women and psychological disorders are more prevalent among women than men, with more men than indicating ADHD (6.4% vs. 3.8%), and self-identifying with a learning disability (3.1% vs. 2.7%), but more women indicating a psychological disorder (4.9% vs. 2.6%).

Among the overall first-year population, 11.9% reported that they had some sort of disability/condition, and another 2.7% reported that they had two or more disabilities conditions, for a total of 14.6%. Research indicates that when two or more disabilities are present ADHD is most often one of the conditions (Wolf, 2001), and this was the case with our data on the incoming class of 2010 as well. Among students reporting two or more disabilities, three out of five (60.8%) reported that one of their conditions was ADHD. In addition, ADHD was most often combined with one of the other “hidden” disabilities. Among this year’s incoming students, 1.4% self-identified with ADHD and either a learning disability or a psychological disorder, and in some cases both. Due to issues with executive functioning and self-regulation, among others, we

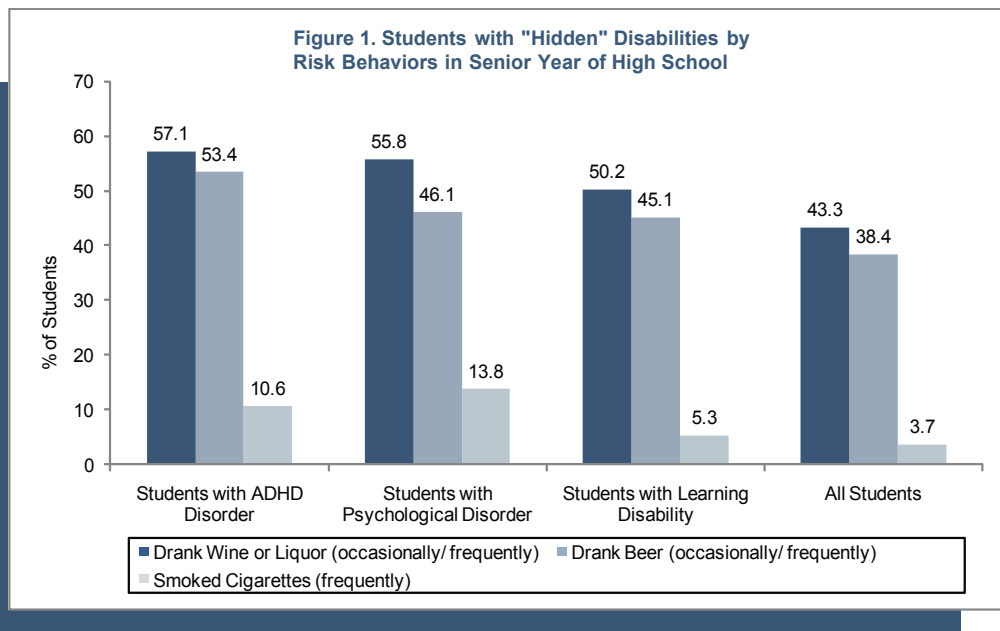
Table 1. Incoming Students Reporting a Disability/Medical Condition, by Sex (percentages)

Disability/Medical Condition	Men	Women	All Students
Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)	6.4	3.8	5.0
Psychological disorder (depression, etc.)	2.6	4.9	3.8
Learning disability (dyslexia, etc.)	3.1	2.7	2.9
Physical disability (speech, sight, mobility, hearing, etc.)	2.7	2.7	2.7
Chronic illness (cancer, diabetes, autoimmune disorders, etc.)	1.3	2.1	1.8
Other	2.8	3.6	3.3
One reported disability/medical condition	11.9	11.9	11.9
Two or more reported disabilities/medical conditions	2.5	2.9	2.7

know that students with ADHD are at a greater risk for psychosocial and academic challenges during college (Wolf, Simkowitz, & Carlson, 2009).

Young adults with “hidden” disabilities have a much higher rate of drug and alcohol use than their peers without these conditions (Wolf, 2001). Among first-year students a significantly higher percentage reporting “hidden” disabilities drank alcohol during their senior year of high school. More than half of first-year students with “hidden” disabilities reported drinking wine or liquor “occasionally” or “frequently” during senior year and almost as many reported “occasional” or “frequent” beer consumption (See Figure 1). The figures among the overall student population are 43.3% for wine or liquor and 38.4% for beer consumption. The highest frequency of usage of beer, wine and liquor is among the population of students reporting ADHD. Almost three out of five (57.1%) students with ADHD reported wine or liquor use, and more than half (53.4%) reported beer consumption. Cigarette smoking is also higher among students with “hidden” disabilities, than in the overall student population. Just 3.7% of the overall first-year population reported smoking “frequently” compared to 5.3% of students who report a learning disability, 10.6% of students who report ADHD, and 13.8% of students who report a psychological disorder.

As discussed in Wolf (2001), Wolf, Simkowitz & Carlson (2009), substance abuse issues only magnify the difficulties these students face, making it even more of a challenge for them to achieve academically. Data reported from students with “hidden disabilities” confirms the presence of these challenges (See Table 2). As compared to the 70.5% of first-year students overall who reported earning a B+ or better high school



grade-point average, half (49.2%) of ADHD students and just more than half (53.5%) of students with a learning disability had grades in high school this good. The figures for students who report a psychological disorder (64.2%) are somewhat better. Results also show that first-year students with “hidden” disabilities have lower academic and social self-concepts at the start of college than do students in the overall population. Specifically, students who self-identify with ADHD or a learning disability have particularly low academic self-concepts as compared to the overall student population (16.7% and 12.4%, respectively, in the high score group on the CIRP Construct Academic Self-Concept as compared to 22.9% among students overall). Whereas, for social self-concept students who report a psychological disorders are particularly low (17.2% in the high score groups on the CIRP Construct Social Self-Concept as compared to 27.2% among students overall).

Table 2. High School Experiences, Self Concepts and Expectations for College for Students with "Hidden" Disabilities (percentages)

Survey Item	Students with ADHD Disorder	Students with Psychological Disorder	Students with Learning Disability	All Students
B+ or higher average HS grades	49.2	64.2	53.5	70.5
CIRP Construct: Academic Self-Concept (high group)	16.7	20.6	12.4	22.9
CIRP Construct: Social Self-Concept (high group)	28.6	17.2	23.3	27.2
CIRP Construct: Habits of Mind (high group)	29.5	33.3	27.7	25.8
Expectations for college				
CIRP Construct: Likelihood of College Involvement (high group)	21.9	29.3	23.1	25.3
"Very Good Chance" that I will:				
Make at least a "B" average	58.8	66.2	56.5	66.4
Get tutoring help in specific courses	35.2	33.5	44.5	30.7
Need extra time to complete degree requirements	8.7	7.2	13.7	6.5
Seek personal counseling	13.4	31.0	14.8	9.7

Despite the fact that students with “hidden” disabilities have on average lower high school grades and academic self-concepts, they are more likely to practice academic habits in high school that are associated with academic success and lifelong learning. Among the overall student population, 25.8% score in the high score group on the CIRP Construct Habits of Mind, compared to 27.7% of students who report a learning disability, 29.5% of students who report ADHD, and 33.3% of students who report a psychological disorder. Assisting “hidden” disability students to build upon and recognize their strengths, especially as they relate to their academic habits is one way that those providing services to this population can help these students build the academic confidence they need to succeed.

In looking forward to the experiences these students expect in college, first-year students who report ADHD or a learning disability expect to be somewhat less involved in college than do students overall (21.9%, 23.1%, and 25.3% respectively in the high score group on the CIRP Construct Likelihood of College Involvement), but first-year students who report a psychological disorder expect to be more involved than the overall student population (31.0% in the high score group). In terms of academic achievement in college, both students who report ADHD (58.8%) and learning


disabilities (56.5%) are less likely to expect a B average or better grades, but students with psychological disorders (66.2%) are just as likely as students overall (66.4%) to expect high grades.


Students with ADHD, learning disabilities and psychological disorders are also more likely than students in the overall population to expect to need tutoring in specific courses, to take longer to degree, and receive personal counseling while in college. Learning disabled students are the most likely of the students with “hidden disabilities” to expect to receive tutoring (44.5%) and to need extra time to degree (13.7%), and students with psychological disorders are the most likely to expect to receive personal counseling (31.0%). Colleges will continue to need to factor in these increased demands for services as we see more students with these needs entering our institutions.

References:

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Wolf, L. E., Simkowitz, P., & Carlson, H. (2009). College students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 11, p. 415-421.

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