

## Essential Elements of Programs Supporting Students with Executive Functioning Challenges

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*Students with executive functioning challenges (EFCs), many of whom are capable of college success, often struggle academically and are at risk of slipping through the cracks in our postsecondary education system. This article describes common elements in three postsecondary programs that provide support to students who struggle with executive functioning due to learning disabilities, attention differences, or neurodiversity. These programs are all anchor campuses in the College STAR network. College STAR (Supporting Transition Access and Retention) is a grant-supported project that facilitates partnerships between programs with a strong emphasis on making postsecondary campuses welcoming for students with learning differences. This paper identifies essential elements, common across each program, that have been necessary to make a positive difference for a wide variety of college students.*

According to a 2016 study from Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, 99% of jobs went to individuals with an education beyond high school (e.g., a degree, certificate, or another credential) and 73% to people with a bachelor's degree or higher (Carnevale et al., 2016). These findings highlight

the crucial importance of postsecondary education in today's economy. Because many positions now require job seekers to have some postsecondary education, approximately 60% of students with disabilities enroll in an institution of higher learning within 8 years of leaving high school (Newman et al., 2011). From 2015 to 2016, 19.4% of U.S. undergraduates reported having a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). This percentage included students with high incidence and invisible disabilities, such as specific learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and autism spectrum disorder. Many students with the aforementioned diagnoses also have executive functioning challenges (EFCs). However, the majority of college students with disabilities who receive special education services in secondary school choose not to self-disclose in the college setting (Cole & Cawthon, 2015; Newman & Madus, 2015).

## **Depiction of the Problem**

Current methods for transitioning and retaining students in postsecondary settings can fall short of adequately preparing them to successfully navigate the college environment and persist to graduation (Davis et al., 2011; Horowitz et al., 2017). Growing enrollments of students with high incidence and invisible disabilities in postsecondary education (Raue & Lewis, 2011) are encouraging, but their patterns of attendance and degree completion lag behind their typically developing peers (Newman et al., 2011). It is important to note that not all students who exhibit EFCs have diagnosed disabilities (LD@School, 2019). However, students with EFCs can find themselves transitioning from home and school environments with consistent support and daily structure to the college setting, which allows for considerable flexibility in how students spend their time and how and when students seek assistance.

Although executive functioning skills are important in many educational transitions, they may be critical in the transition to a college or university setting. Students with EFCs can be at increased risk due to the immediate and considerable demands on self-regulation that occur in the college setting (Grieve et al., 2014). Moreover, in order to be academically successful in college, students need skills that allow them to plan ahead, organize study materials, manage their time or schedule, set long-term and short-term goals, and solve novel problems (Fleming & McMahon, 2012). Due to potential challenges with these skills, students with EFCs often have less successful academic performance and outcomes (e.g., concentration, time management, and test-taking skills) when compared to students without EFCs (Petersen et al., 2006; Rabin et al., 2011)

Key legislation, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (Pub. L. 110-325, 2008), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Pub. L. No. 93-112, 1973), and the Higher Education Opportunity Act (Pub. L. 110-315, 2008), have generated extensive interest in identifying methods to transition, support, and retain students with disabilities in postsecondary settings. Yet, successfully supporting students with disabilities can only occur if we learn to anticipate the growing diversity of learning profiles on campuses today and if students access and use the appropriate supports. A wide variety of student support opportunities exist on most campuses, and students with EFCs may find it necessary to identify and assemble a network of support that aligns with their learning profile. However, strategically approaching and navigating new learning environments can be problematic based on the very nature of EFCs (Goudreau & Knight, 2018).

## **Description of Practice**

College STAR (Supporting Transition Access and Retention) is a grant-funded project that enables participants to partner in the development of initiatives focused on helping postsecondary campuses become more welcoming of students with learning and attention differences. College STAR provides a network of support for students who historically have slipped through the cracks in our education system—students who are capable of college success, but who often struggle academically because they learn differently. By weaving together direct support for students, instructional support for faculty members, and partnerships with public school professionals, this initiative provides the opportunity for participating campuses to learn together and implement effective strategies based on the universal design for learning (UDL) framework (Meyer et al., 2014) for teaching students with varying learning differences in postsecondary settings.

Three different universities located in North Carolina in the University of North Carolina System worked together to infuse the College STAR mission throughout their respective campuses with a two-fold focus: (a) provide direct support to students within our specific target population (and the focus of this manuscript) and (a) encourage a campus-wide focus on UDL to benefit all students. The As-U-R program at Appalachian State University located in western North Carolina admits incoming first-year students, transfer students, and current students who need support with executive functions. As-U-R has the capacity to support approximately 100 students at any given time and has enrolled students over the past 8 years. Bronco STAR is an academic support program at Fayetteville State University in central North Carolina that has worked for the past 6 years toward increasing access and decreasing barriers to a college degree for students who learn differently. Entry

for this particular student support program at Fayetteville State does not require a diagnosis, and students with EFCs, ADHD, and other learning differences receive free on-campus resources. The STEPP Program (Supporting Transition and Education Through Planning and Partnership) at East Carolina University in eastern North Carolina has been in place for 13 years and supports small cohorts of students with diagnosed learning disabilities in the postsecondary setting. Many of the students in the program also exhibit challenges with executive functioning. These anchor programs use slightly different models for serving students, as they were designed with a specific campus mission, culture, and priorities in mind. Each program has seen improvements in student performance on a variety of metrics (e.g., retention, progress toward graduation, recovery to good academic standing). A commitment to shared learning permeates throughout the initiative, and a project-wide evaluation model guides our work together. Despite working in different universities, with different numbers of students, and using different models of support, we found that we had several elements in common, especially in regard to supporting students with EFCs.

During summer 2019, representatives from each of these three unique student support programs met for a two-day retreat to explore our similarities more directly. Representatives from the respective programs first met in campus-based teams and identified the core program elements that they perceived to be critical for the success of students with EFCs. The three different lists were compared, and the larger group identified the elements that were common to all three models. At times, participants needed to intentionally strip away the packaging of each element (e.g., who provided the support, what it was called) and focus instead on the function it served. For example, some programs used different labels (e.g., mentor, coach) or different staffing (graduate students, staff members) to provide very similar elements of student support. Our interest was in identifying elements that were common across the student support programs, regardless of how they were built into the program. As another example, all three schools had an intentional approach to building a sense of community between cohorts of students, but each had a different strategy for achieving that goal. Participants had to first get past thinking of these things by their format (most familiar to participants) and identify the function (element) of that program feature.

Through a series of discussions, the group identified 10 essential elements that were common to each program and developed working definitions for those elements. These key features included the following:

- Multifaceted recruitment system,
- Method for assessing program capacity and selecting participants,

- Clearly communicated commitment expectations,
- Emphasis on key transition points throughout the college experience,
- Opportunities for scaffolding or individualization,
- Availability of consistent point of contact for students,
- Strategies, resources, and expertise specific to EFCs,
- Structured routines,
- Community or relationship building, and
- Messaging methods and materials

We describe takeaways from those discussions here in hopes that they are helpful for other postsecondary education settings in supporting students with EFCs or those helping high school students with learning differences prepare to transition to a college campus.

## **Recruitment**

Each program uses an ongoing two-pronged approach to K-12 and on-campus recruitment. In an effort to proactively connect with students early in their college experience, each program attempts to reach middle and high school students as early as possible through strategies such as attending college and transition fairs, collaborating with high school counselors and special education personnel, connecting with the state’s Division on Career Development and Transition, and sending recruitment literature to public and private schools.

Ideally, students will connect with the appropriate support programs before their first day of college and begin building effective academic routines early in their college experience. However, not all students are aware of available support (or even their need for support) prior to matriculation. Others may resist connecting with support right away, preferring to try college on their own first, only reaching out for help after they have experienced academic difficulty. We have especially found this to be common for students with EFCs. Therefore, developing an on-campus recruitment strategy is essential to ensure that students have a path through which they can connect with support later in their college experience. Once on campus, initial contact can be made with prospective students through New Student Orientation, Weeks of Welcome, Freshman Seminar courses, student organizations, and on-campus advertisements. These efforts can be aimed at first-year, transfer, early college, readmitted, and graduate students. Counseling offices, disability services, academic advisors, and instructors have also served as valuable partners in the recruitment process.

## **Assessing Program Capacity and Selecting Participants**

Some of the support strategies that are helpful for students with EFCs may be time-intensive such as planning, goal setting, and organizing (Rivera et al., 2019). Moreover, EFCs can present in students with or without a documented disability. Therefore, we found it important to determine realistic capacity and how we identify students who are a good fit for our support within those parameters. Each program's capacity is determined from a self-assessment that includes, but is not limited to, the program mission, support from campus leaders, budgets, staff availability, physical space, alignment with other existing campus resources, and individual student needs. Some of the processes we have found helpful for determining eligibility and planning individualized support include surveys (e.g., Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Functioning [BRIEF], Learning and Study Strategies Inventory [LASSI], and homegrown surveys), interviews, documentation review, teacher recommendations, and student essays or statements. The sustainability of a program is directly influenced by clear messaging, a straightforward application process, and clear participation requirements. Some of our programs have adopted a tiered model to be able to match the level of support with the intensity of the student's need. This can be particularly helpful for accommodating larger numbers of students who will naturally bring varying needs and risk levels.

## **Clearly Communicated Commitment Expectations**

Students with EFCs thrive in structure, but they also need some level of ownership in defining that structure. Each program is structured in such a way as to be flexible with students as their situations, life experiences, and needs evolve over time. That said, providing students with clearly communicated expectations for commitment at the outset and following through on those has been a critical program element. Appearing too ambiguous or "loose" with expectations may be more frustrating than helpful for students with EFCs. Our goal is to create situations where they can maximize their talents and strengths while doing our part to create a strong structure and space for consistency (often an area of difficulty for this group of students).

Although each campus uses a different system, all the programs require participants to make the commitment to stay connected with the programs until graduation (regardless of the beginning date). While the programs realize the level of participation may vary from semester to semester, maintaining a base level of connection to the support program is essential. We feel strongly that it would be counterproductive for students to perceive a support program as something they

can finish or earn their way out of. Instead, committing to connect with the support program until graduation helps reinforce the idea that outgrowing the need for support or accountability is not our goal and that there is no shame in proactively tapping back into more intensive support during a particularly demanding, challenging, or high-stakes semester. Our goal is to help students develop strong self-knowledge that will enable them to identify periods where they need more or less support and use self-advocacy skills to take action accordingly.

Communication about participation levels and commitment expectations should be closely tied to the recruitment and selection process. For example, in a program that offers multiple tiers of support, student needs will determine the level of support received, and the coinciding level of participation expected. Some examples of mechanisms used by our campuses to establish conditions of commitment include contracts with clearly defined program goals and participation expectations, individualized plans co-created with the student, and a goal-setting protocol co-developed with the student. Updating these resources each semester can help to capture lessons learned, preview the upcoming term, and establish a shared understanding of supports and academic routines that the student will use. Committing on paper helps to provide some ownership for the student and document concrete expectations. These documents also provide the support program with a judgment-free, tangible mechanism for having ongoing conversations about academic goals, needs, and support. During times when a semester feels daunting or overwhelming, they also provide clear, small steps students can accomplish to put them in the proximity of key supports. Adding a signature helps the student understand that this is a real commitment and use of university resources (i.e., person-hours, technology).

## **Emphasis on Key Transition Points Throughout the College Experience**

The transition from high school to college is often recognized as a critical life transition. When admitting students, we must meet them where they are and help them transition to the tools, mindsets, and supports needed to be successful in college. Encouraging students to proactively use available campus supports prior to running into challenges is vital. That said, the incoming transition to college is not the only transition students experience during their time as undergraduates. We have found that strategically anchoring key supports in other transition periods provides naturally occurring opportunities to reconnect, reassess, and redesign supports needed by students along the way. For example, programs can target the transition from general college to a specific major, from full-time coursework to full-

time internship, and from their college program to graduate school or the workforce.

## **Opportunities for Scaffolding or Individualization**

The needs of students with EFCs are highly variable and require individualized levels of support and scaffolding. Individualization helps programs avoid creating unnecessary barriers for students by attempting to put them in a singular box of support. Our programs typically use a more structured and unified model with students early on, gradually transitioning ownership of these decisions to students through practice, instruction, coaching, or mentorship in executive functioning skills. Students may initially feel uncomfortable or anxious with this process, so it is important to closely monitor how the student reacts to reduced levels of external support. Students with EFCs may require more practice and exposure to strategies and skill development techniques than others and may not progress at the same pace. Generalization of skills and incidental learning may not occur at a traditional speed. We have found it helpful to focus energy on what students need as opposed to how quickly students acquire and implement new skills.

## **Availability of Consistent Point of Contact for Students**

We have found it critical to identify one point person to serve as a contact for students who have EFCs. This person is not expected to have all the answers all the time but instead serves as a consistent, safe place where students can find accountability and ask for help. The primary role of this individual is to provide intensive and intentional support, ensuring that a student does not “slide off the campus radar.” Depending on the campus, the point person may be an academic advisor, a graduate assistant mentor, a program coordinator, an academic coach, or an office of disability services representative. Our programs find that identifying a point person who can maintain a relationship with the student over time is important. Therefore, our mentors commit for at least one year and serve as the front-line support for planning, performance tracking, encouragement, and troubleshooting for their matched students. On many campuses, student support resources are decentralized. Therefore, one duty of the point person may be to help students find the appropriate campus resources for their specific needs or goals and hold them accountable for accessing that service. Our programs find that weekly, recurring one-on-one meetings (given the same priority as attending class) are effective for ensuring that most students with EFCs stay on track. That said, the modality of support, strategies, and coaching style can be different from student to student. Regardless of the target college setting, K-12 educational professionals can offer valuable support by helping students find and meet an appropriate point



person who can help them navigate their initial college experience.

## **Strategies, Resources, and Expertise Specific to EFCs**

Students with EFCs may not approach academic routines systematically and strategically and often can benefit from direct instruction in academic routines that may come more naturally to their peers (Faggella-Luby et al., 2019). Furthermore, developing a strong knowledge of their personal learning profile can help them select academic routines that align with their strengths and challenges, as well as develop self-advocacy skills to find and access appropriate support (Daly-Cano et al., 2015). Part of the direct support provided to students in our programs includes learning strategy training and an intentional emphasis on confidence-building and self-advocacy. We also include an emphasis on helping students learn to talk about their learning profile and share their learning strategies and needs with others (e.g., professors, campus support offices, advisors). Some characteristics of students with EFCs may be easily misinterpreted as a lack of motivation or college readiness, and the ability to self-advocate effectively is essential. Practice and instruction in this area can occur in postsecondary and K-12 settings.

Many of the assistive technologies used by our students (e.g., text-to-speech or speech-to-text software) were only available to students with identified disabilities just a few years ago, but now they are becoming ubiquitous on college campuses. Not only does this reduce the stigma of using these technologies, but it also provides increased options for students. Students with EFCs now have access to a variety of tools that can help with tasks such as planning, time management, organization, and studying (Ofiesh et al., 2002).

Peer tutoring is a core element of most of our programs, whether delivered within the program or in partnership with a centralized tutoring center (Cooper, 2010). When possible, embedded tutoring is even more beneficial for our students with EFCs. By blending the supplemental instruction model (Jarrett & Harris, 2009) with additional emphasis on training tutors about learning differences and UDL, some of our tutoring centers have been able to help the campus anticipate and embrace learner variability in innovative and impactful ways.

## **Support for Structured Routines and Learning**

“I thrive in structure but have a hard time creating it for myself.” This remark by a student in one of our programs sums up the experience of many students with EFCs. Thus, creating support for students to develop consistent and structured

routines is important in helping students with EFCs to be successful in the college setting (Grieve et al., 2014). Structure helps students create patterns of success to stay organized, plan, and manage time. Although students co-create a plan for their personal routines, some supports we find helpful include pairing students with someone who knows them well (e.g., mentor, advisor, coach), requiring structured study hall hours, using an intensive advising model (Donaldson et al. 2016), using a standard planner, and practicing a self-monitoring routine. Additionally, providing a parallel curriculum through seminar courses that teaches habits for academic success in such a way that is reinforced in structured study sessions has proven helpful when students first begin working with the program.

## **Community/Relationship Building**

Creating a sense of belonging through community and relationship building can be critical for students with learning challenges (Vaccaro et al., 2015; Heinisch, 2017). The social and emotional elements of learning in the postsecondary setting are beginning to be more fully recognized (Mytkowicz & Goss, 2012; Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013; Wang et al., 2012; Socas, 2017), and these considerations may be even more important for students with EFCs (Riggs et al., 2007). Campuses can foster a sense of belonging through engagement practices such as coordination in cohorts, organization of living-learning communities, community-building events, and other intentional activities (Ribera et al., 2017).

Having a home base may be especially important for students. Students on a college campus can sometimes feel like they are a small fish in a big pond, yet there are ways for them to get connected and build relationships with others. In programs that support students with learning challenges, the community aspect is often organically created due to the students having something in common and, in some cases, a physical location to connect. However, in colleges that do not have specific programs, individuals can get connected through campus organizations, disability support offices, academic advising, and tutoring centers, among others. Some students may need coaching and support in order to become connected with clubs or other campus resources or organizations. Encouragement to make a strong effort to attend campus events designed to build community among students.

Our campuses have found that having monthly community events helps students feel connected to each other and the program through fun and often non-academic type activities. These might include a football tailgate, soup day, holiday events, and other activities like a game day or fried chicken day. Each of these events helps to create a welcoming learning environment while developing and maintaining important

relationships between students, peers, and staff. We find that when students feel connected to a place or person and know they have a place where other students like them connect and receive support, they are more likely to reach out for help, attend important learning sessions like tutoring or mentoring, drop in when needed, and feel less stigmatized.

## **Messaging Methods and Materials**

Just as in the classroom, all of our anchor programs have found that using a variety of messaging methods and materials (multiple means of representation) is crucial for effectively communicating with students. Building community is key, and some of the most efficient ways to reach students are through social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat), shared testimonials, and giveaways. Brief videos, weekly and monthly newsletters, and memes create interest in emails and enable programs to stay in touch with students. When a student shares a testimony in a video, it attracts other students who are experiencing the same scenario and who require additional academic support. Furthermore, enlisting student help for messaging and recruiting can result in the best ideas and resources.

## **Implications**

Colleges and universities must be ready to support the students who are on our campuses today, and this is a changing population. EFCs are common characteristics of students across several disability diagnoses and may require support beyond what universities are minimally and legally required to offer. Additionally, students without a formal disability diagnosis can exhibit characteristics of EFCs and are at risk of struggling in the college setting. After years of working with students with EFCs on campuses of varying sizes, we have identified key elements that have contributed to program success across several institutions. While some universities may not be able to create entire programs directly targeting these challenges, these elements can be woven into existing campus support offices to help build networks, reduce barriers, and open doors for students with EFCs. Research is needed to assess the impact of EFCs on the college experience more clearly, as well as identify best practices for helping students succeed. Researchers and practitioners in K-12 and college settings must work together to ensure that students with strong academic potential are successfully navigating the educational transition to the college setting. Furthermore, creating opportunities and breaking down barriers to postsecondary education for students with EFCs is beneficial not only to the students and the universities serving them but also to society at large. As students learn effective executive functioning strategies (e.g., planning, time management,

organization, self-advocacy) that help them succeed in college, they are better prepared to join the workforce, provide for themselves, and successfully contribute to society.

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