

Student Voices

A Study of Young Adults With Learning and Attention Issues

Executive Summary



THE THINKING BEHIND THIS RESEARCH

Individuals with learning and attention issues (LAI) are just as smart as their peers. Many describe them as out-of-the-box thinkers who approach challenges in unexpected ways and who, with access to the right kinds of accommodations and supports, use effective and often highly creative strategies for learning and solving problems. In fact, a number of today's most successful business leaders and entrepreneurs—individuals like Richard Branson, Charles Schwab and Tommy Hilfiger—have shared their LAI status and have spoken openly about the ways that their struggles with LAI have contributed to their success.

Research studies and personal accounts in the popular press during the past two decades have documented that many young adults with LAI have made successful transitions into adult life, are thriving socially, emotionally and educationally, and are satisfied in their careers. We know very little, however, about the factors that led these individuals to either “more successful” or “less successful” adult outcomes.

LEARNING DISABILITIES RESEARCH

There is a substantial body of research from the past two decades showing that young adults with learning disabilities are at risk for negative adult outcomes.

As detailed in the [*State of Learning Disabilities-3rd edition \(2014\)*](#), incidence reports and clinical studies tell us that they:

- Experience social and emotional difficulties
- Struggle with their ability to live independently
- May be prone to substance abuse challenges
- Are clearly at risk for academic problems in postsecondary education settings

Studies have also reported that they often have difficulty finding and keeping jobs and are more likely than their peers to experience underemployment. This means that the jobs they secure are less demanding, below their skill levels, and at lower pay grades—and offer fewer opportunities for advancement than their peers' jobs.

Important research findings about young adults with learning disabilities are also available from the [National Longitudinal Transition Study \(NLTS-2\)](#). This research project collected information from students ages 13 to 16 receiving special education services in 2000 and followed them through 2010 as they moved from secondary school into adult roles. The NLTS-2 focused on topics like high school coursework, extracurricular activities, academic performance, postsecondary education and training, employment, independent living and community participation.

Important research has also been done in the areas of [success attributes](#) and [risk and resilience](#), both of which have implications for addressing the needs of the LAI community. Most recently, attention has been paid to [grit, tenacity and perseverance](#) as critical factors for success.

The lack of clarity about what predicts (or is most strongly associated with) successful outcomes for young adults with LAI was the driving force behind the *Student Voices* project. We believe that identifying and sharing knowledge with parents, education leaders, policymakers and young adults themselves about the factors that influence successful transitions can have a huge and positive impact on this population.

This knowledge could result in a number of key changes. It could impact and shape:

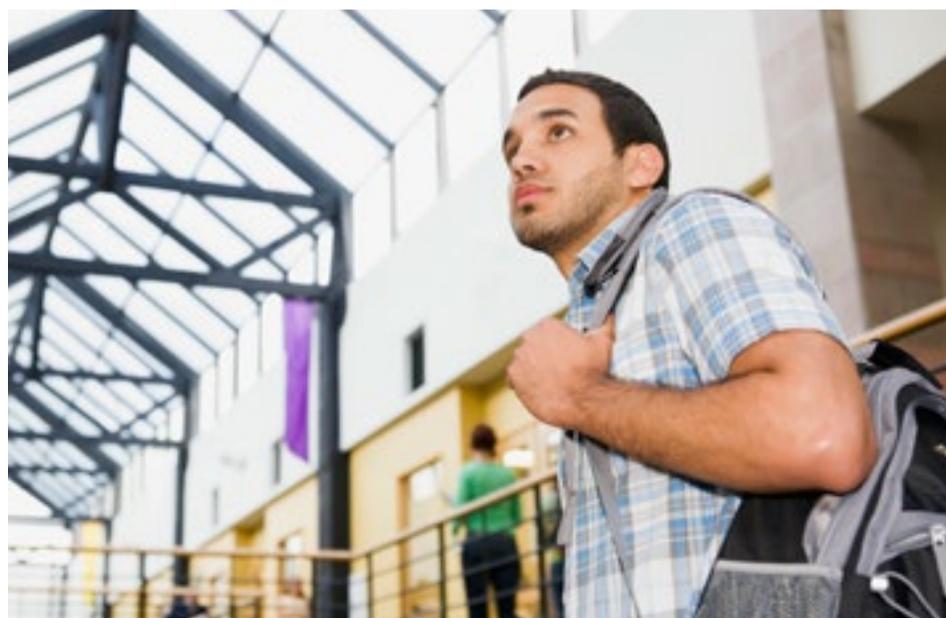
- The ways that schools structure and provide instruction and support services for teens as they transition to and from high school
- How teens and young adults are provided with mentoring and internship opportunities
- Teacher education and professional development across the helping professions
- The development and implementation of policy related to K–12 schooling
- How young adults with LAI participate in the workplace
- Ways to directly engage teens and young adults during this time of transition
- How the general community views these young adults

Overall, this knowledge could improve the lives of these individuals, beginning early in their school careers and extending into their postsecondary journey.

We conducted this study to fill the knowledge gap about what factors contribute most significantly to positive post–high school outcomes for individuals with LAI. It was designed to:

- Discover what young adults say and how they feel about their journeys, before and after high school
- Gather firsthand information about outcomes for young adults in key areas, including emotional well-being, community involvement, social engagement, family relations, postsecondary education, employment, independent living and life satisfaction
- Identify the specific behaviors, experiences and characteristics that predict or are obstacles to positive outcomes for young adults during this time of transition
- Understand how these predictors contribute to positive and negative post–high school transition outcomes
- Gain perspective on the types of services and supports young adults need to ensure a successful transition to adult life
- Pinpoint the importance that young adults place on opportunities and experiences that have shaped their post–high school outcomes, and use these self-reported data to inform the creation and implementation of effective programs and interventions

We hope that sharing these findings will lead to more questions, generate further analyses and result in the creation of services, tools and supports that will benefit young adults with LAI during their post–high school years.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Young adults with learning and attention issues (LAI) are more likely to struggle in high school and during their transition from high school than their peers without LAI.
- Even those who are getting support report that they struggle with reading, writing, math, attention and social and emotional issues.
- Most pronounced are differences in reported self-confidence; young adults with LAI are four times more likely to struggle with confidence than their non-LAI peers.
- Interestingly, evidence suggests that high school may be a low point for students with LAI; in our study, students with LAI reported on par or even better satisfaction with their job or postsecondary environments than students without LAI, which may suggest that high school was so difficult that the “real world” offers a reprieve.
- Young adults with LAI segment into three groups—those who struggle, cope and thrive—based on their self-confidence and how supported by their community they feel.
- For the young adults who did thrive, they had three shared experiences:
 - A supportive home life
 - A strong connection to friends and community
 - A strong sense of self-confidence
- When young adults with LAI described a “supportive home life,” they said a parent or caregiver:
 - Made them feel that they would be successful
 - Understood their learning and attention issues
 - Was able to help them with their learning and attention issues
- When young adults with LAI described a “strong connection to their friends and community,” they said that they:
 - Felt a sense of belonging to their school community
 - Had relative ease with social issues
 - Were comfortable taking the first step making new friends
- When young adults with LAI described being “self-confident,” they said that they:
 - Tended to see the positive in situations
 - Were comfortable taking the first step in reaching out to peers and adults
 - Didn’t give up, even when things got hard or obstacles got in their way
- Factors such as demographics and income were not found to be the most important factors in determining successful transitions for young adults with LAI.
- Having a formally identified LAI was not found to be what mattered most when it comes to successful transition outcomes.
- While a supportive home life, a strong connection to friends and community, and self-confidence were the strongest predictors of success, other factors that were also influential were:
 - Being resourceful and showing perseverance
 - Making decisions and taking action
 - Overcoming negative messages from peers and adults
 - Engaging in sports, exercise and healthy eating choices as part of a lifestyle
- In addition to factors that predict success, other supports were found to help young adults experience success. These include:
 - Support for a LAI early in life (e.g., having an IEP or 504 plan before high school, having a voice in the IEP/504 process)
 - Close relationships with mentors
 - Supportive teachers who understand the needs of students with LAI
 - Participation in planning for a smooth transition from high school
 - Participation in extracurricular activities

Young adults who are thriving post-high school have 3 things in common:



Supportive Home Life



Strong Sense of Self-Confidence



Strong Connection to Friends & Community

Detail from *Student Voices* infographic. To view click [here](#).



METHODOLOGY

The approach used for the *Student Voices* project built on prior research and knowledge about teens and young adults during the post-secondary transition process. The current study, conducted in English only, was designed to build a deeper understanding of this population in a truly unique way. It captured self-reported information and perceptions of young adults, reflecting on their experiences and how they felt about themselves, their parents and their teachers. It also gathered details about the services and supports that, from their perspective, were most helpful during the last two years before and after leaving high school.

Phase I

The first phase of this research project involved 29 one-on-one in-depth interviews with students attending high school and young adults who had already exited high school and were attending two- or four-year colleges, were looking for work, or were gainfully employed. Ranging in age from ages 16 to 24, these young people were recruited through local facilities in Denver, Colorado, and Paramus, New Jersey, having self-identified as individuals who reported to struggle due to identified learning and attention issues (i.e., ADHD, dyslexia, auditory processing disorder, dyscalculia) or for reasons that were unknown and not formally identified.

A psychologist conducted these qualitative interviews using open-ended projective and direct questioning techniques to guide discussion. The psychologist encouraged these young people to tell their authentic stories and be forthcoming with many details about their lives.

A research team, comprising marketing research professionals and experts in special education, analyzed the content of their responses and identified working hypotheses about:

- The services they reported to be most helpful
- The importance they placed on social-emotional well-being
- The family situations and dynamics they reported as being relevant to their struggles
- The specific pain points that defined their current situations and were regarded to be obstacles to their success in the future

What we learned from these interviews served as the foundation for the second phase of research: a national online survey. A separate panel of young adults with LAI was also engaged to review the findings and to offer advice about the next phase of our research.

Phase II

The second phase of this research began with the creation of an extensive online survey. The survey captured information about experiences both during and after high school. We engaged a volunteer panel of young adults with identified learning and attention issues throughout this phase of the project. Their feedback about the wording of items and the structure of the survey was invaluable.

We chose to use an online format because it ensured confidentiality and encouraged feedback and honesty on questions that probed personal information. The survey was available in a read-aloud, text-to-speech format, and 19 percent of the 1,221 participants selected this option. The survey could be completed in one or more sessions, and on average, participants took 30 minutes to complete it.

Participants were asked to share demographic information and to reflect on their middle and high school years and respond to questions about a wide range of topics. These topics included:

- The services and supports they received
- Type of school attended and classes taken
- Assistive technologies and accommodations
- Attitudes and plans about the future
- Social and family support
- Extracurricular activities
- Self-perceptions and mind-sets
- Specific learning difficulties
- Attributes that probed perseverance, self-advocacy and self-determination

They were then asked to respond to items about their after-high school experiences and outcomes in areas including:

- Social engagement
- Community participation
- Employment
- Postsecondary education
- Participation in extracurricular and recreational activities
- Psychological and physical health
- Living situation
- Life satisfaction

Participants

The 1,221 participants in this survey were drawn from national online panels. The invitation to participate was statistically aligned with latest census data on region, gender and ethnicity. All participants had spent their last two years of high school in public high school settings and were one to two years out of high school at the time of the survey.

Data were collected for three groups of young adults primarily between the ages of 18 and 21:

- **LAI with identification:** These young adults reported having undergone a prior evaluation and were formally identified with a learning or attention issue. (N= 359)
- **LAI without identification:** These young adults had never been formally identified with LAI (whether or not they'd been evaluated) and reported to have struggled with one or more issues (e.g., academics, social) that had a significant impact on their success in school and beyond. (N= 457)
- **No LAI:** These young adults reported no significant struggles and had never been evaluated for an LAI. (N=405)

Interviews of 344 parents (whose young adult children were also surveyed) were included in this research, too. Parent involvement was helpful to recruit young adults both still living at home and those living away at college or outside the home. Parent responses also ensured accurate information (e.g., family income) and verified the young adults' recollections of the services and supports they received during their K–12 school career.

This allowed us to determine which of three groups, based on an earlier study, parents fell into:

- Those who were struggling with the challenges that come with having a child with learning and attention issues and who reported to be in most need of help
- Those who were conflicted about their ability to manage the needs of their child with these issues
- Those who were optimistic about their family's journey with learning and attention issues but continue to need information and guidance about raising a child with learning and attention issues

Data Analysis

Multiple statistical techniques were for employed for data analysis. These included: factor analysis, cluster ensemble segmentation, correlation, stepwise multiple regression and stepwise discriminant function analysis.



LIMITATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

As is true for any research study, there are limitations to how these findings can be used. These limitations should be viewed as a guide to discourage misinterpretation or overgeneralization of the findings.

By sharing our thoughts about limitations, we also hope to encourage additional study that could clarify and expand upon the current findings. Some of the limitations from this study are described below.

Sample Bias

- Our screening process could not control for the possibility that survey participants with LAI were individuals who were willing to talk about their issues and that there is an untapped sample of individuals who are reluctant to discuss them.

Availability of Data

- Individuals with ADHD *only* were represented in greater numbers than those with ADHD *and* co-occurring issues. Individuals with ADHD were also more prevalent in the sample than those with other types of LAI.
- A small number of individuals self-identified as having “dyslexia” were included in the survey. This may be due to fewer of these individuals being represented on research panels. It may also be a consequence of young adults with dyslexia not knowing or being reluctant to disclose that they have this condition.

Methodology

- While the total LAI sample size was adequate for conducting an in-depth driver analysis, small base sizes for certain sub-groups of respondents or types of responses did not allow for deeper statistical analysis of some specific characteristics.

Verification of LAI

- No formal documentation of LAI was required for participation in this study, nor were participants evaluated for specific type or severity of difficulty. Responses gathered for this study were intended to reflect the perceptions of young adults, which while subjective in nature, were reflections of their reality.
- Some research has shown that persons with LAI are more willing to self-disclose and openly share their struggles online than in face-to-face situations.



CONCLUSIONS

The *Student Voices* research is only the beginning. It's a starting point in our understanding of the often tumultuous journey of young adults with LAI as they move beyond high school into postsecondary education, the workplace and the community at large. Stepping back and reflecting on key takeaways from this work, a few important themes emerge.

Mind-sets, attitudes and feeling supported trump academics.

It turns out that that success immediately after high school is mainly driven by how well these young adults cope with their challenges and the degree to which they feel self-confident, supported by parents, teachers, peers and the community. These things account for 82 percent of the explanation for why a young adult lands in their place on the outcome continuum. While our data confirm that academic instruction and support matter, we found that it's not likely to be effective unless combined with social-emotional support. This means that having an IEP or a 504 plan alone is not what most strongly predicts whether young adults will be better able to navigate the challenges they face during the postsecondary transition process. And enrollment in postsecondary education is not, in and of itself, a key driver of positive transition outcomes.



Certain skills and attributes matter more than others.

While there is no single profile of young adults with LAI who have successfully navigated the transition from high school, our data point to perseverance, resourcefulness, decisiveness and healthy living lifestyle as characteristics that are strongly associated with positive outcomes.

Every young adult is different.

There is no single profile that describes the characteristics of young adults with learning and attention issues. Young adults with identified LAI are represented along a continuum of outcomes (from “strugglers” to “copers” to “navigators”) together with their peers whose LAI have not been formally identified.

Self-confidence matters a lot.

We learned that the most successful young adults with LAI shared a number of characteristics that are related to self-confidence. For example, they tended to be comfortable in peer social situations, generally had a more positive attitude, felt at ease dealing with emotional issues and were able to speak up for themselves.

Upbringing matters.

Not surprisingly, young adults who perceive their upbringing as supportive and nurturing report higher levels of self-confidence after high school. That doesn't mean, though, that young adults from less supportive or more complex family backgrounds can't overcome challenges with the right types of support. Our data confirm that a number of young adults who reported having significant challenges in their home life were able to overcome these barriers and achieve successful outcomes after high school. We also found that supportive home life, self-confidence and belonging to a community are more important than factors such as income and demographics in predicting successful post-high school transition outcomes.

Negative messages hurt.

Beyond the obvious hurt caused by name calling and teasing, the presumption of laziness and the lowering of expectations by others for young adults with LAI was made clear during the one-on-one interview process. Survey data confirmed that negative messages are correlated to more negative outcomes.

Earlier recognition is important.

While having an LAI formally identified during the early grades does not predict young adult outcomes after high school, it was found to be a critical supporting factor. Having a plan of help in place in elementary or middle school proved much more beneficial than first receiving help in high school. This is especially true for young adults who also reported having had a positive and supportive home life, feeling self-confident, and feeling a close sense of belonging to their community during their high school years.

Speaking up counts.

Students with LAI who took an active role in IEP, 504 plan and transition planning meetings were more likely to report better post-secondary outcomes. Participation in these meetings before high school was associated with an increased likelihood of enrollment in postsecondary education and in young adults getting needed services and supports after high school. It also resulted in young adults reporting that they were more proactive in planning for post-secondary transition and self-advocating for their needs.

Mentoring helps.

Having pre-transition mentoring relationships was clearly associated with more positive outcomes after high school. Our findings also suggested that having multiple mentors may be even better.

Community connections make a difference.

Having an active social life, feeling a connection to one's school community and having strong positive ties to peers and groups of people outside of school settings during high school helps young adults with LAI to experience success during their post-high school years.

Having a confident and capable parent is strongly associated with young adult transition success.

Parents who perceive themselves as optimistic about their ability to manage their child's struggles and help them overcome their challenges are more likely to have young adults who are "navigators" rather than "copers" or "strugglers."

We've learned so much from these young adults. Their responses to more than 100 questions about various aspects of their lives offer us a truly unique perspective about what influenced them most during their K-12 school years and during the few years that follow.

The challenge of using these research findings to improve outcomes for young adults with learning and attention issues is still ahead. This project has reinforced the importance of listening to "student voices" and the need to involve young teens and young adults themselves in activities moving forward.

Whatever additional research and analyses, policies and programs, tools and strategies, activities and opportunities follow, it is critical that they align with the self-reported realities of young adults themselves, their understanding of past experiences, their perceptions of current challenges and their aspirations for the future.



IMPLICATIONS FOR PARENTS

There are many powerful messages to parents from the results of this study, all reinforcing the critical role that parents can play in helping children overcome challenges and prepare them for a successful postsecondary transition.

What we have learned from listening to “student voices” is that parents should:

- Find ways to help their child to believe in themselves, to develop confidence and not to give up when confronted with challenges. Making sure that children with LAI feel supported at home is a key to their being able to weather the challenges they face in school and beyond.
- Encourage their child to participate in activities that build and reinforce a sense of belonging to the school and general community and a strong connection to their peers. This could involve membership in afterschool clubs or teams, community groups such as scouting or 4H, music activities such as playing in a local band or singing in a choir, local sports leagues and involvement in volunteer or faith-based activities. These are all ways to encourage and reinforce positive connections to peers and community.
- Help their child understand the nature of their LAI and be ready to answer questions and offer encouragement and support.
- Be an active partner with school personnel in the post-secondary transition process, and be sure to involve their child at every step of the way. If discussions about transition are not raised by the school during middle school years, make a formal request that they begin.
- Be ready to take action. If you suspect that LAI are not being addressed, don't wait and see whether problems will go away by themselves. Know how to request a screening or evaluation, how determinations to provide services and supports are made, and what roles parents and children should play in decisions about getting help.
- Be on constant alert for negative messaging, and take action when it occurs. Being called “lazy” or “stupid” or being ridiculed because of poor grades or trouble with skills such as reading, writing and math are pain points that can last a lifetime. Also be on guard for decisions that are based on misinformation about LAI. With the right kinds of support, LAI should not be a roadblock to taking advanced-level courses in high school, performing well in college, and enjoying satisfaction in the workplace.
- Know how important a role parents play for children with LAI in guiding successful transition from childhood to adulthood. Young adults who were found to be successful “navigators” were most likely to have parents who were knowledgeable about their child's issues, well-informed about the services and supports their child needed to succeed, confident about ways to get needed help for themselves and their child, capable and confident about their ability to provide encouragement and guidance, and optimistic about their ability to guide their child and about their child's ability to succeed.
- Know that they are not alone. It's easy for parents to feel overwhelmed, embarrassed or responsible for their child's struggles with LAI. Look for resources and support from school personnel, other parents who have had similar experiences, trusted professionals, and organizations that specialize in LAI and related problems. And take advantage of online resources, including [Understood.org](https://www.understood.org), that offer easy access to information, insights, checklists, tips, useful tools and experts as well as opportunities to engage with other parents in a safe and supportive virtual community.



IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

The findings of this study have many implications for ways that the education community can guide children toward successful post-secondary transitions and support teens and young adults with LAI on their journey to adulthood.

What we learned from listening to “student voices” is that educators and school leaders should:

- Recognize the characteristics of each group (“strugglers,” “copers,” “navigators”) on the outcome continuum and use these segmentation categories as a framework to plan and implement interventions and supports.
- Be aware that young adults with and without identified LAI were represented in each of the groups across the continuum. Only 38 percent of the young adults surveyed fell into the “navigator” group, and of those, less than a third had been given diagnoses or classifications based on specific areas of disability. Looking only at whether students have IEPs and 504 plans provides an incomplete picture of who they are and what they need to succeed.
- Implement strategies that help students attain behaviors and characteristics that accelerate movement toward more positive outcomes on the outcome continuum.
- Ensure that all students with LAI (those formally identified and those not recognized as eligible for special services and support) are provided with opportunities to develop and enhance social-emotional competencies that were found to be significant drivers of postsecondary transition success. Building behavioral strengths and fostering social-emotional well-being can be addressed through core components of frameworks such as positive behavioral intervention and supports (PBIS).
- Identify and address the needs of all students who struggle with LAI before they experience frustration and failure. This can be accomplished by school-based practices such as multi-tier system of supports (MTSS) and [response to intervention](#) (RTI).
- Include students in early stages of transition planning and ensure their ongoing active participation, especially when they move from middle school to high school and throughout their high school years.
- Recognize the important impact that teachers can have on informing and empowering parents, and facilitate parent-school dialogue that goes beyond addressing issues of compliance. Create opportunities to deal directly with key drivers of success such as building self-confidence and feeling a strong connection to peers and to the school and greater communities.
- Provide students with access to mentors and with opportunities to successfully engage in extracurricular activities that build self-confidence, meaningful connections with peers, and a sense of belonging to the community.
- Provide students with accurate information about their LAI and provide them with structured and safe opportunities to develop and practice self-advocacy skills. Knowing how and when to disclose their LAI and understanding their rights and protections and how to access services and supports during the K–12 years and beyond are critical to successful transition from high school and successful outcomes in the years that follow.



IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM PROVIDERS

The results of this research point to new and exciting opportunities to impact the well-being of children, teens and young adults with LAI as well as to improve the ways that they are supported at home, in school and in the workplace.

Listening to “student voices,” some implications for funders and program provider are that:

- Children and young adults with LAI comprise a critical population of citizens with unmet needs. Funding for creative programming is needed to ensure that these individuals are provided the supports and interventions they need to prepare for successful transitions from high school and achieve successful postsecondary outcomes.
- Helping students to become confident and effective self-advocates is a key to successful postsecondary transition. Opportunities to develop and hone these skills through existing programs or through new program activities and partnerships are strongly recommended by the research results.
- Helping parents to provide a positive and supportive home life for children with LAI was also found to influence successful transition outcomes. Programs, tools and resources are needed to help build parental knowledge about LAI, foster confidence in their ability to support their child, and promote feelings of optimism about their child’s journey through school and beyond.
- Helping students with LAI to become more engaged in their school and general communities and to develop strong relationships with peers can be one of the most significant factors leading to successful post-high school outcomes. Existing programs that offer these opportunities should be provided expert guidance and support to welcome and include students with LAI.
- The implications for action based on these research findings extend well beyond the home and the classroom. Understanding the characteristics of young adults with LAI should inform activities in such areas as public policy development and advocacy, juvenile justice, young adult leadership development, mentoring, workplace policies and culture, public awareness, transition and support services in higher education and teacher preparation.



TERMINOLOGY

The following is a glossary of terms used in this research project.

Terminology	How it was used in this study
Continuum	The range of negative to positive post-high school outcomes and characteristics that were found among the young adults in the study. It is most important to remember that different segments or groups along this continuum shared many common features and that the ways that they differed were often by degree and severity.
Copers	The name we used to describe young adults whose characteristics and outcomes positioned them in the center of the continuum. These individuals presented with a mixed bag of successful and not-so-successful outcomes after their transition from high school. Further analysis resulted in even further segmentation of this group, named “uncertain worriers” and “solitary copers” to further describe how they are dealing with life after high school.
Driver	The name we used to describe young adults whose characteristics and outcomes positioned them in the center of the continuum. These individuals presented with a mixed bag of successful and not-so-successful outcomes after their transition from high school. Further analysis resulted in even further segmentation of this group, named “uncertain worriers” and “solitary copers” to further describe how they are dealing with life after high school.
Internet panel	Internet panels were created to provide an accessible and cost-effective way to reach various audiences. These panels are carefully constructed and maintained to ensure that panelists remain engaged and provide quality feedback/opinions. Researchers are able to use these panels to recruit participants for surveys with confidence that they represent census population proportions or any chosen population characteristics.
Mentor	Young adults were asked to name whether they had a mentor (“someone more experienced than themselves who they look up to and go to for guidance and advice”) during their high school years. In this study, mentors included family members, school personnel, adults in a workplace, clergy or others (adults or peers).
Learning and attention issues (LAI)	<p>A term used to broadly define the types of struggles reported by young adults. Survey participants “with identified LAI” said they had received one or more diagnoses (i.e., ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia) or had confirmed disorders in such areas as auditory or visual processing, executive functioning, and communication. Participants “without identified LAI” reported having learning and attention issues that were not formally recognized through evaluations but that had significant impact upon their lives.</p> <p>A matched “no LAI” group of young adults was also included in the study for the purpose of comparison. These participants reported no significant struggles with learning and attention issues and stated that an evaluation was never recommended nor requested.</p>

Terminology	How it was used in this study
Navigators	The name we used to describe young adults whose characteristics and outcomes positioned them on the positive end of the continuum. These individuals presented with the most successful outcomes after their transition from high school. Further analysis resulted in even further segmentation of this group, named “cautious optimists” and “confident navigators” to further describe how they are dealing with life after high school.
Segmentation	The word used to describe the groups into which young adults fell based on their responses. In our study, we were able to separate the entire sample of young adults into three segments, and then subdivide each segment into two groups. Representing the characteristics of young adults in this way provides a unique and powerful lens through which to understand the strengths and weakness of each group and to design programs and services that address their needs.
Social-emotional	<p>A type of information we gathered to learn about the thoughts, feelings and social relationships of young adults during this time of their lives. For example, to learn about how they perceived their home life, we asked the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My parents always made me feel that I would be successful • I had at least one parent/adult who was able to help me with my LAI • I had at least one parent/adult who understood my difficulties with LAI
Strugglers	The name we used to describe young adults whose characteristics and outcomes positioned them on the less positive end of the continuum. These individuals had the least successful outcomes after their transition from high school. Further analysis resulted in even further segmentation of this group, named “disengaged strugglers” and “anchorless strugglers” to further describe how they are dealing with life after high school.
Successful outcomes	<p>The term used to describe the specific behaviors and characteristics of young adults in the study. The outcome areas considered—those consistent with the transition literature—were education, employment, community involvement, living situation, family and social relations, as well as life satisfaction. Young adults who struggled the most reported fewer positive responses in these areas compared to those who ended up on the other end of the outcome continuum. The kinds of information used to determine successful outcomes included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being well adapted, decisive and self-confident • Having a sense of belonging and feeling socially secure • Making and keeping friends and being successful in navigating relationships • Being a strong self-advocate • Feeling less stressed and more satisfied with life after high school
Young adults	These individuals were all U.S. residents who had attended public high school and were out of school for one to two years at the time of the survey. The majority of survey participants were 18 to 21 years old.

Why was this research approach used for this study?

This study did not involve clinical interviews or the review of comprehensive educational, psychological and medical records. It relied on self-reporting by young adults of their perceived status across a wide range of topics, including:

- The types of help they received in different settings
- Their participation in extracurricular and recreational activities
- Their overall satisfaction with school and work activities, their perceived levels of stress and satisfaction regarding educational
- Employment
- Their perceived ability to set goals, persevere and be a self-advocate
- Their social-emotional well-being

An online approach was deemed to be an efficient and non-threatening way to gather information about the needs and preferences of this target population. Recruiting subjects from an Internet panel ensured anonymity and participants were drawn from a nationally representative sample of the population.



Why use the term “learning and attention issues (LAI)”?

This term was used to reflect the current reality that one in five students in K–12 school settings struggles with learning and attention, but only one in twenty is formally identified and provided specialized instruction and support. This study was not intended to shed light solely on individuals with identified “disabilities” who have benefited from services and protections under education and civil rights law. Our goal was to capture feedback from individuals struggling with a wide range of LAI issues and be sure to include those who, for any number of reasons, may have slipping through the cracks in terms of receiving services and supports. The LAI term was also field tested with young adults and found to be easily understood.

Why did the study gather information from self-report only and not include reviews of diagnostic reports by professionals?

There is a substantial body of literature that details the ways in which students with learning and attention issues struggle in their transition from high school to the world beyond. As detailed in the [2014 State of Learning Disabilities report](#), we know that they:

- Are less likely than their peers to graduate from high school with a regular diploma
- Have poor college completion rates
- Struggle to secure meaningful employment
- Are at increased risk for encounters with the criminal justice system

We wanted to know why and we believed that the best first step to discovering answers was to reach out to these young adults themselves. Probing diagnostic records would have offered information based on the impressions of professionals while the intention of this study was to provide a powerful, insider perspective. An investigation that studied both self-perceptions and test-score data might be an interesting follow-up activity, but it was not the focus of this work.

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STUDENT VOICES RESEARCH: FORMS AND DATA SETS

An important goal of this project is to provide easy access to our data in the hope that it will stimulate discussion and further research and will lead to activities that benefit young adults with learning and attention issues. The complete data set from this study—along with the Executive Summary and other materials—is provided online at NCLD.org/studentvoices.

Data are provided in a number of ways:

1. Young adults with learning and attention issues/young adults with no learning and attention issues
2. Young adults with LAI with identification/young adults with LAI without identification
3. Young adults across the six groups in the transition outcome continuum
4. Young adults across the three collapsed groups in the transition outcome continuum

Reading the Executive Summary and other posted materials before reviewing these data tables is strongly recommended.

The survey tools used in this project are also provided for reference. Click [here](#) to download the *Young Adult Screener*, the *Parent Pair Screener* and the *Full Questionnaire*.

Questions and feedback about this project are welcome at studentvoices@nclld.org.