This Way to School... Lessons From the Classroom

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Clubhouse model or medical model: what form of treatment sent me to my bachelors degree in social work program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and then into their graduate school? The clubhouse model began with a group of men who called their support group simply "We Are Not Alone." They started a movement that provided association and vocation, friends and jobs, and showed both were an option for people with mental illness. Another perspective is that my recovery was made possible by the latest generation of medications. Am I another clozaril kid? It is probably both.

My psychiatrist and the nursing staff at my clubhouse, Yahara House in Madison, WI, were responsible for my obtaining clozaril treatment. And with clozaril, I became integrated into Yahara House, serving on committees and speaking publicly, performing work-ordered days, and engaging with both members and staff of the clubhouse. From the confidence I gained from the clubhouse, it was a natural next step to further my education, in my case making the decision to attend the local community college, the Madison Area Technical College (MATC). Previously, I had had a catastrophic experience at the University of Michigan, largely caused by the negative symptoms of schizoaffective disorder. I had no idea things would be different at MATC, but I wanted to try. Good move on my part. What clozaril did not do, Yahara House did. I took school seriously and did very well.

A directed study on supported education for people with mental illness was one of the reasons for my success in community college. This was completed with the aid of the Great Lakes Area Supported Education Research (GLASER) project of the University of Michigan. Early after returning to school, I decided to keep a list of things I learned along the way for success in college, which I referred to as "Tips for Academic Success." This list (included as an appendix to this article) contains the raw materials for my success in a postsecondary education program. One needs to understand that the school environment is an incredibly social process. My medication opened the door to relationships with other people, and Yahara House gave me the relationships I needed to support me through the stresses I encountered daily in school.

The importance of continually adding to this list of "Tips for Academic Success" is not to be underestimated. It represents the street smarts of my experience going to school all of those days. I have a copy of this list on my wall next to my desk at home. It and I have grown together in the changing environment of higher education. I see a lot of things differently than I did on my first day at University. It is different but still important. The list has grown, as I did, in my journey toward my bachelors degree. But the bottom line, which I see overlooked a lot, is that you need to talk to people about what you are going through. The clubhouse is very powerful in teaching this, and for me, learning this lesson was critical.

The list was started, but I had further to go. I learned in the clubhouse the most important precursor of success in the job world is a desire to work. I believe the same thing is true in education, wanting it goes a long way toward getting it. I worked hard, and I was persistent, two values intrinsic to my success throughout my life.

But I needed people who believed I could succeed. No one achieves life alone. Through the community of the clubhouse, I acquired a reputation for being serious. By taking the first step and attending a community college, my community expanded beyond Yahara House. I attracted more people who had faith in me than those who had no faith. I had my detractors, but ultimately, more people smiled when I entered the room than did not. I had a very serious and persistent mental illness and I wanted to go to college. I would never have achieved that goal had people not been of the belief that I could succeed under the lens of scrutiny in my studies.

No one knew how I would perform once at the University of Wisconsin, but I believe I have vindicated those who put their names on the line. I did this by proving I am an asset to the University and its diversity. The Dean of Students office made it clear that their approval of my entrance into the University was a good decision when they declared me a finalist in the Outstanding Undergraduate Returning Adult Student Awards, an award that gave me enough money to put a dent in my gas bill. There have been bumps along the way, but I do feel I have the right to be proud of what I have accomplished.
The list is how I stayed in college. Getting in was emotionally draining and an immense gamble for myself and my friends. Staying successful is, as every student can tell you, the excitement of worrying and performing every day. What I came up with in my educational experiences with the GLASER project, and at MATC and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, are the do’s and do not’s of staying in college. I have done it so far, through the gifts of the clubhouse model and the medical model. My sincere hope is that many more find what they need to join me.

Tips for Academic Success

Academic Skills

Understand qualifications required.
Meet timelines for applying, enrolling, and financial aid.
Be clear in understanding class work and assignments.
Prepare for and take tests (success in this will bring more success).
Group work in and out of class (expect that you will have some).

Time Management

Long- and medium-range goals are as important as short ones.
Follow schedules, complete assignments, and prepare for tests.
Know your schedule and schedule your time appropriately.

Self-Advocacy

Negotiate with instructors.
Ask/answer questions in and out of class, learn not to be intimidated.
Type and extent of disclosure, respect your own and your peers.
Respect privacy and decisions of others concerning type and amount of disclosure (to Disability Resource Services staff, the program division, instructors, and your peers).

Coordinate support (Disability Resource counseling and accommodations).

Self-Management

Managing internal/external distractions, including symptoms.
Know your necessary support and resource people (family, therapist, friends, instructors, peers, mentors, students, and spiritual).

Important Thoughts

Choice, choice, choice, there is always one—think about it.
School is the equalizer, the stigma buster.
When feeling lost, we look for guidance.
Staying, not getting, is the goal.
Team building is time spent together, it is important, and it eliminates isolation. Groups hold power.
Nothing succeeds like success.
Come to know yourself as a developing person, capable of growth, and positive change.
Keep in mind the enormity of the task.
Isolation makes it that much easier to quit.
Keep in mind “Who I am” has not died.
Entering school is a public transition; working in school is a public success.
Focus on the capacity to learn, not the illness.
School is social, emotional, and full of options, every day and every hour.
Studenthood is achieved when it is harder to quit than to continue.
Learned helplessness, self-hatred, hopelessness, passivity, despair, and hypervigilance are baggage the person from the mental health care community can leave with the transition into the role of student. The focus then becomes: “I have strength, my rehabilitation and recovery are not clinical, my life is changing and I am changing.”
As much as guidance, people who are traveling an academic road need a secure, safe place within which to “vent,” a place to share concerns and triumphs knowing that what is said will be held in confidence and sincerely understood.