
*Identifying & supporting university students
with a history of reading difficulties*

**IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE 1:
Standard Outreach**

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Supporting university students with a history of reading difficulties

Purpose

Our long-term goal is to develop evidence-based interventions for post-secondary students identified as having a history of reading difficulties and to support their academic achievement, university retention and graduation, and successful transition to the workforce. The purpose of this implementation guide is to describe methods for identifying and supporting these students.

Background

Students who self-report a history of reading difficulties have low literacy levels and below average academic achievement. Below we provide background on our approach to identifying and supporting these students.

Identification. We have learned that university students identified by the Adult Reading History Questionnaire-Revised (ARHQ-R; Parrila, Corkett, Kirby, & Hein, 2003) have low literacy levels. Their reading comprehension levels are, on average, *four grade levels below* those of typical university students and similar to students with diagnosed learning disabilities (Deacon, Cook, Parrila, 2012). Deficits in word-level reading skills place students with a history of reading difficulties at Level 2 on the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS; Strucker et al., 2005), a level that restricts full participation in a knowledge economy. And yet, these students often do not have a diagnosis nor the access to the supports and services that accompany such a diagnosis.

Preliminary results from our current cross-institutional longitudinal research reveals that students with a history of reading difficulties encounter different challenges during their post-secondary studies than their peers with no history of reading difficulties. For example, students with a history of reading difficulties earn lower GPAs and fail or withdraw from courses at rates higher than typical university students (Bergey, Deacon, & Parrila, 2015; Chevalier, Parrila, Ritchie, & Deacon, 2015). In addition, students with a history of reading difficulties report deficits in their reading, learning, and studying strategies (Bergey et al., 2015; Chevalier et al., 2015). For example, compared to students with no history of reading difficulty, those with a history of reading difficulties report poorer ability to prepare for and take tests, monitor their comprehension and select main ideas, and concentrate while studying. Without targeted outreach, students with a history of reading difficulties do not appear to use academic support services at a different rate, despite their clear additional academic difficulties (Chevalier et al., 2015).

We now have beginning evidence of the long-term impacts of having a history of reading difficulties. For a small sample of students, we see lower rates of university completion than for students without a history of reading difficulties and we will soon be able to report on workplace outcomes for this group.

Support. How can university students with a history of reading difficulties be supported? As a first step in answering this question, we have been working with student services at a university to identify and provide proactive outreach to students with a history of reading difficulties through academic advising. Academic advisors triage students' academic and personal problems to help them access the resources they need to be successful. Prior research suggests that use of academic advising is associated with improved academic performance and increased retention (Kot, 2014). To support students with a history of reading difficulties, we provided targeted invitations via e-mail and phone calls to a randomly selected group of students with a history of reading difficulties.

Results from two years of testing of this approach at Dalhousie University (Deacon, Tucker, Bergey, Laroche, & Parrila, 2017) are promising. Compared to the control group, students with a history of reading difficulties who received the targeted outreach used academic advising to a greater extent than those who did not receive targeted outreach. Importantly, students with a history of reading difficulties who experienced serious academic difficulties during their first year were far more likely to use Academic Advising in their second year if they had received outreach in the first year. Thus, it seems that this early outreach acts as a trigger to seek academic advising once students experience academic difficulties. Outreach to students with a history of reading difficulties did not change their GPA, but it did increase the number of credits earned, such that the number of credits earned became similar for students with a history of reading difficulties and typical university students without a history of reading difficulties. Thus, this method of providing targeted outreach to university students with a history of reading difficulties appears to be a cost-effective first step in supporting these academically vulnerable students, at least within their first two years of university.

We will soon be able to report on the impacts of this outreach on rates of university completion and employment outcomes for one of these two cohorts. We hope to see effects on both of these outcomes.

Procedures for identifying university students with a history of reading difficulties

Screening tool. The *Adult Reading History Questionnaire – Revised* (ARHQ-R; Parrila et al., 2003) is a simple and brief questionnaire consisting of two scales: the Elementary School scale (8 items) and the Current Status scale (12 items). Research indicates that the Elementary School scale is a reliable instrument for identifying university students with a history of reading difficulties. Each question has five-point Likert scale response options (see example below). The ARHQ-R is available in both French and English. To request access to the ARHQ-R, please contact Dr. Rauno Parrila (see contact information below).

Example Item

Which of the following most nearly describes your attitude toward reading as a child?

1) Very positive 2) Somewhat positive 3) Neutral 4) Somewhat negative 5) Very negative

Screening procedure. To determine whether a student has a self-reported history of reading difficulties, administer the Elementary School scale of the ARHQ-R. These 8 questions take less than 5 minutes to complete and can be administered via an online survey platform or paper-and-pencil format. To follow our procedure, administration of the ARHQ-R takes place at the start of the first year of the post-secondary program to maximize the potential of early identification. For example, our screening period begins two weeks prior to the start date of the academic semester and ends two weeks into the semester. Once the questionnaire is completed, one can determine whether a student has a self-reported history of reading difficulties by scoring the responses to the questions from the Elementary School scale.

Implementation. The administration of the ARHQ-R offers flexibility. Screening with the ARHQ-R can be:

- Administered online or on paper
- Administered regardless of the age of the post-secondary student
- Modified slightly to suit reading level needs or institutional context (any modifications to questions require the author's written consent)
- Administered in English or French.

Language: Please note that the efficacy evidence for using ARHQ-R as a screening tool is based on individuals with a first acquired language that matches the language of the post-secondary setting. As such, the questionnaire included questions about students' first spoken language and first language for

reading and writing, both of which were inclusion criteria for our research. At this time, there is no evidence as to how ARHQ-R might be used with post-secondary students learning in a language that is not the language in which they first learned to read. Therefore, we recommend that the ARHQ-R be administered in the language that matches the individuals' first language and the language of the academic setting.

We encourage you to think about how this screening tool can be incorporated into your institution's existing initiatives. For example, using the ARHQ-R as a screening tool may help identify students who might benefit from existing programs at your institution but may need encouragement to access these programs.

Methods for supporting university students with a history of reading difficulties

Outreach. After students with a history of reading difficulties are identified using the screening procedure described above, outreach can commence. Just as with the screening procedure, outreach is best conducted early in the first year of a post-secondary program in order to maximize potential benefits from proactive outreach. The goal of outreach described below is simply to establish a personalized point of contact with an advisor and encourage students to make an appointment so that they can discover what services are available to them. Outreach with this goal can be carried out using the following outreach procedure.

Outreach procedure

1. Send a personalized email to students with a history of reading difficulties from an advisor or an advising office. In our research, this e-mail was sent from a First Year Advisor from the academic advising centre. Emails were personalized by addressing students by their first name. This type of personalization can be done with minimal effort using a mail merge function of word processing software (e.g., *Microsoft Word*).
2. Communicate the following points of information in the email:
 - a. What topics advisors can provide guidance on
 - b. How advising appointment can be booked
 - c. That advising can be useful for all students, not just for those who are struggling
3. Follow up e-mail communication with a phone call that emphasizes these same points of information. Advising appointments can be scheduled during the call for interested students. To minimize time demands on staff, trained peer advisors can be used to make phone calls. Phone numbers can be collected as part of the screening questionnaire.
4. Send a personalized reminder e-mail emphasizing the points of information from Step 2

Implementation. The outreach method chosen was based on our context. At our university, there is a centralized academic advising centre with advisors available to meet with first and second year students. In their third and fourth years, students are encouraged to see faculty-specific advisors. Furthermore, going to the academic advising centre is non-compulsory for our students. We know that there are many variations on how services are delivered from one institution to the next. Just as with the screening tool, we encourage you to think about how our outreach method could be modified to fit your institution's existing communications initiatives.

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