

Title: Understanding What Executive Function Means for the Transition to University

Byline: Dr. Rick Bryck

For many students, and especially for those who learn differently, making the jump from high school to university can feel overwhelming. Students suddenly find themselves with more freedom, more choices, and less structure. They're juggling classes, deadlines, independence, and new social pressures. That's a lot. And while there are many things that can help them succeed at university—good study habits, supportive professors, new friends—students should also look to sharpen a set of skills that they may not have heard about: executive function.

What is “executive function,” anyway?

Think of executive function as your brain's behind-the-scenes manager. It helps you set goals, plan, stay focused, switch tasks, and adjust when things don't go your way. It's what keeps you on track when you've got multiple assignments, a part-time job, and a life outside the classroom.

Researchers often break executive function down into three key parts:

- **Working memory** — holding and using bits of information in your head. For example: remembering a set of instructions while doing a task.
- **Inhibitory control** — resisting impulses and distractions. Think: staying off your phone when you should be studying.
- **Cognitive flexibility** — switching gears when needed. Like going from reading a novel to writing a paper, or shifting your thinking when a plan doesn't work out.

These three pieces work together. If one gets weak, you might struggle with planning, time management, or shifting priorities.

How these get tricky in a university setting

In high school, teachers often cue students: “Start this now,” “Don't forget,” “Here's how to break it down.” In a university setting, students are expected to do more of that themselves. That's a big shift, especially if their executive function skills are still developing.

Without good executive skills, students may procrastinate, feel stuck, or have trouble juggling big tasks. For neurodivergent students, these challenges are frequently more intense.

Concrete strategies to try now

The good news: executive skills can get stronger with practice. Here are a few techniques worth trying:

1. **Break big tasks into bite-sized chunks.**
Don't try to tackle reading 60 pages and writing a paper all in one sitting. Split an assignment into parts—read part A, write part B, revise part C. Use checklists or worksheets

that guide that breakdown. The Pomodoro method (working in 25-minute sprints, then taking short breaks) is popular for a reason.

2. Set “if-then” plans.

For example: If I see my social media app open while studying, then I’ll close it and work for 10 more minutes. This simple “if this, then that” framework boosts self-control.

3. Pause and reflect.

Before jumping into a task, stop and ask: What’s my goal? How will I do this? What’s one thing I’ll try differently if it’s not working? Taking this breath to think about your thinking is called metacognition, and it helps you adjust midstream.

4. Switch between detailed and big-picture thinking.

When reading or writing, try to zoom in (details, structure, grammar) and then zoom out (main message, themes, connections). That flexibility keeps you from getting stuck in one mode.

If students take time to practice these strategies starting in high school, they can build confidence and independence, allowing them to feel more in control when deadlines pile up or when surprises pop up in the schedule. Over time, that growth helps students to succeed not just academically, but in life beyond school too.

Learn more about Executive Function

This LD Awareness month, many educators and parents are looking for ways to better support neurodivergent learners in their life. To learn more about Executive Function—whether as a student, parent, or educator—I would highly recommend the upcoming virtual conference of the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, which will take place this November 22nd. I’ll be presenting my own executive function research at the conference, and other experts will be touching on similar topics.

If you’re an educator looking for a more in-depth examination of executive functioning and other key elements of supporting students who learn differently, please consider [exploring Landmark College’s graduate-level certificate in Learning Differences in Neurodiversity](#). As the world’s first college built exclusively for students who learn differently, we are proud to have had hundreds of educators come through our program, from countries around the world.

Rick Bryck’s work centers on the study of executive function (EF) including understanding disparities in EF and testing the efficacy of interventions, programs and strategies aimed at enhancing EF. He also serves as the campus lead on a National Science Foundation project providing STEM mentoring for students with disabilities. Rick regularly presents professional learning workshops on EF and educational techniques for enhancing learning and teaches in Landmark College’s Learning Differences and Neurodiversity online certificate program for education professionals.