The Relationship Between Stress and Academic Performance in Community College Students

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Introduction

Research supports that the first year of college is critical for students. First-year students are often struggling to meet the demands of college while fulfilling their personal responsibilities. Previous studies have focused on the effects of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and family support on the academic success of these students. Past literature has found that first-generation and non-first-generation students experience college differently, which could explain the gap in their academic achievement. This study examines the impact stress has on the academic performance and mental health of community college students, while attempting to understand the between group differences of these students.

Hypothesis

H1: Students who experience more life stressors would have a lower mental health status and lower academic outcomes than students who experience fewer stressors.

H2: First-generation students may have more life stressors than non-first-generation students.

Methods

Participants

N=479

Demographics

- European American/White: 45%
- African American/Black: 15%
- Asian/Asian American: 15%
- Hispanic/Latino(a): 15%
- Middle Eastern/Arab American: 5%
- Other: 2%

Procedures

- Participants in this study were from Normandale Community College Paths to College Success Classes.
- Participating students could earn course credit.
- Students completed a questionnaire the first week of the semester, which asked questions related to demographics and about perceived present control, perceived stress and mental health levels.
- The questionnaire also asked the students to write what has been stressing them out in the past week.
- Several data were obtained after the study, including the participant’s semester GPA as well as the percentage of registered credits completed.

Results

The results showed that a large percentage of students experienced stressors related to school, relational, and/or work.

Correlations Between Total Numbers of Stressors and Outcomes

Although having more stressors was negatively correlated with GPA and credit completion, the results were not significant

Differences Between First-Generation and Non-first Generation

First generation community college students were only significantly different from non-first-generation students, in that they perceived themselves to have less control of their present thoughts, feelings, and emotions (Present Control).

Discussions

This study is congruent with the findings of previous research. The results indicate that stress impacts students’ academic performance and mental health. The relationship between the total number of stressors on mental health and academic outcomes, highlights that students who reported more types of stressors also reported significantly higher levels of:

- Perceived stress symptoms
- Mental health problems
- Lower levels of perceived present control

Our second hypothesis, that first-generation community college students face more life stressors than non-first-generation students, was not supported.

For many students, college is the ultimate symbol of independence. However, because many first-generation students come from interdependent communities, the focus on independence in college, may have led to these students feeling less in control of their lives.

Limitations

- The sample consisted of community college students enrolled in a college readiness course, therefore it is hard to generalize the findings of the study to all first-year students.
- Students may be optimistic at the start of college, which could have biased the results.
- The focus is limited to the impact of stress without taking other factors into account such as self-efficacy and family support.

Future research is needed to:

- Examine community college students at other points of the semester to ensure comprehensive data
- Control for other factors to better establish the relationship between stress on academic performance and mental health

Implications

This study highlights important practical implication for colleges that want to address the effects of stress on first year students. Because many students face many life stressors, it is essential for community colleges to provide accessible mental health services in order to combat the impact of stress. Furthermore, because stress is such a common problem for many first year students, the limited resources provided by community colleges may not be enough to offset the effects of stress.