Perceived Stress and Sense of Belongingness in First-Generation College Students
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Introduction

How do levels of perceived stress and sense of belongingness influence success in college? While it is well-documented that first-generation college students perform lower in academics in terms of GPA when compared to their continuing-generation counterparts, the underlying causes of this disparity are not well understood.

Previous studies (Baum, Garofalo, & Yali, 1999) have asserted that first-generation college students are more vulnerable to facing stress compared to continuing-generation students. In addition, studies have determined that first-generation students are more likely to feel that they do not belong in a college environment.

Combining this with the knowledge that higher stress levels and decreased feelings of belongingness are related to weaker academic performance.

We hypothesized that in a study of college students, continuing-generation students would have lower perceived stress levels and a higher sense of social connectedness and social assurance than their first-generation counterparts.

Our participant pool was derived from a larger, ongoing study examining how socioeconomic status affects students’ physiological responses to academic stress (e.g. exams in students’ hardest class).

Methods

- Participants: 17 undergraduate students (5 first-generation, ages 18-25 years (μ = 20.24)
- Materials: This study was completed in a laboratory environment, with materials including two online tasks, blood and saliva samples, and a series of questionnaires and online tasks.
- Procedure: Participants were differentiated by their generation status in college. Questionnaires and online measures were used to examine psychological stress, while biological specimens were collected to examine physiological stress.
- Tests: T-tests were conducted to compare the mean scores of perceived stress and sense of belongingness (social connectedness and social assurance) between first-generation and continuing-generation students.

Results

When comparing first-generation and continuing generation college students, there are no significant differences when analyzing social connectedness, perceived stress, or social assurance. However, first-generation students had higher perceived stress on average and had a lower mean value for levels of social assurance. Furthermore, an issue in determining a comparison between these two groups of college students was the small number of first-generation participants (n=5) when compared to continuing-generation students (n=12).

Conclusions

With the large population of first-generation students entering higher education, it is increasingly important to ease their transition and allow for their best academic performance. Limitations in this study include the small number of first-generation participants in the study (n=5) when compared to continuing-generation students (n=12).

References