



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 ($\mu = 20.24$)
- **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.

KEY:

-FG=First Generation College Students
-CG=Continuing Generation College Students

Figure 1:

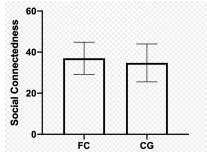


Figure 1 shows the results from the Social Connectedness Scale. This graph revealed that although first generation college students scored higher on the scale, there was not a significant difference between their scores and continuing generation college students ($t(df=16)=0.8725, p=0.3967$).

Figure 2:

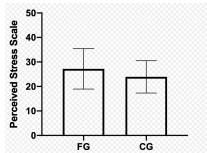


Figure 2 shows the results from the Perceived Stress Scale. This graph revealed that although first generation college students scored higher on the scale, there was not a significant difference between their scores and continuing generation college students ($t(df=16)=0.4769, p=0.6403$).

Figure 3:

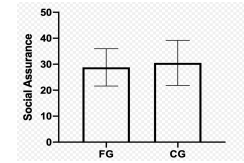


Figure 3 shows the results from the Social Assurance Scale. This graph revealed that although continuing generation college students scored higher on the scale, there was not a significant difference between their scores and first generation college students ($t(df=16)=0.3836, p=0.7067$).

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 students participating in the study ($n=5$) 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 addition, in future versions of this study, we hope to analyze how these psycho-social factors moderate the physiological response to stress.

References

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