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MAUREEN JOHNSON

Indiana State University

ABSTRACT

As adolescents entering adulthood more frequently enroll in community colleges, the need for research concerning stress experienced by this population is increasing as well. The purpose of the current study is to explore and describe community college students' perceptions of stress and stressors. Data were collected through the use of focus groups, observation, and written Feedback Forms. Content analysis was used as the data analysis method. Participants' perceptions of stress were generally similar to those of university students, specifically in their descriptions of the physical and psychological symptoms of their reactions to stress. Furthermore, participants' description of perceived stressors, specifically those of time and financial limitations, social demands, and concerns about the future, were also consistent with stressors reported by four-year college and university students participating in previous studies. However, stressors that may be unique to students participating in this study include extracurricular activities and the commute to school. To prevent the potential health and academic consequences of stress, recommendations are made to facilitate the physical, psychological, and academic well-being of community college students.

KEY WORDS: *college, stress, stressors, health, university.*

INTRODUCTION

In his book *Youth: Change and Challenge* (1), developmental psychologist Erik Erikson discusses the struggle faced by adolescents as they strive to develop their sense of identity. Acknowledging the cognitive development theories of his predecessors (e.g., Jean Piaget), Erikson noted the corresponding changes co-occurring with this cognitive growth:

Such cognitive orientation forms not a contrast but a complement to the need of the young person to develop a sense of identity, for, from among all possible and imaginable relations, he must make a series of ever narrowing selections of personal, occupational, sexual, and ideological commitments. (p. 11).

However, the adolescent's search for his or her identity may be no more apparent than during the time her or she first enters college or a university. At this time, adolescent college students begin the pursuit of a fulfilling career while also developing their sense of personal identity (2, 3). Thus, the college experience is often an exciting one for students, as they make the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, with many students independently forming relationships outside of their families (4).

However, while this transition to college may be one of excitement and growth, the multitude of choices to be made by the young person (as noted above by Erikson, (1) as well as the various changes they experience may also result in a great deal of stress (5). Hans Selye, known as the Father of Stress Research, defined stress as "the non-specific [that is, common] result of any demand on the body, be it a mental or somatic demand for survival and the accomplishment of our aims (6) [preface]." Although Selye's definition is broad, it does suggest the potentially damaging impact of unmanaged stress on the physical, psychological, and academic well-being of college students.

In the spring of 2005, more than 54,000 college students participated in a Web-based form of the American College Health Association's (ACHA) National College Health Assessment (7). In the survey, students reported stress as the top factor impeding academic performance. Stress-related illnesses and events, such as colds, concern for family and friends, and relationship problems were also among the top ten factors (7). This recent survey suggests the significant impact of stress on the lives of college students.

Psychological consequences of unmanaged stress may include anxiety or depression (8). Academically, an inability to manage stress may result in poor academic performance (7) or in a student's withdrawal from their college or university.

Community college students report the most stress related to school-related problems, family problems, relationship problems, and financial problems (9, 10). Roberts et al, (11) investigated the relationship between financial stress and ill health among university students (in this case, financial stress was defined as

difficulty paying bills, number of hours worked outside the university, and whether students considered dropping out of college for financial reasons). Previous literature suggests college students also struggle with balancing the demands of college with the demands of family and work. Furthermore, university students may feel the pressure of having an inadequate amount of time in which to complete the requirements while also balancing the demands of perceived demands of work, family, and social lives (12). The inflexibility of faculty and challenges in receiving financial aid may create additional stressors for community college students (13). These stressors may eventually result in a student's withdrawing from college before completing an associate's degree.

Unfortunately, in their attempt to relieve their stress, college students frequently resort to using maladaptive or unhealthy coping behaviors. These students may self-medicate with alcohol, drugs, or food (14). Furthermore, students who do not have the skills to cope with their stress may eventually harm themselves through suicide attempts or others through violence or road rage (15, 16). Research investigating stress among university students below the age of 24 is well-documented. After graduating from high school, young adults frequently attend a four-year college or university. However, rather than enrolling in a four-year institution, increasing numbers of students under the age of 25 have chosen to enroll in two-year community colleges (17). In fact, over half of all first time students enrolled in public higher education decide to enroll in community colleges (18). Due to potential physical, psychological, and academic consequences, faculty and administrators of institutes of higher education must become aware of the symptoms and origins of stress confronting the students enrolled in their college.

Despite the large proportion of young adults attending community college, literature addressing stress and stress management among this population is limited. Therefore, the primary purpose of the current paper is to describe the community college students' perceptions of and experiences with stress, stressors, and stress management. The findings of the present study may be compared to the current literature investigating university students and stress.

METHODS

Participants

The first phase comprised of two groups of six community college students between the ages of 18 and 24. After obtaining permission from the doctoral dissertation committee, Human Subjects Committee of the sponsoring institution, and the chairman of the department from which participants were recruited, the researcher requested student volunteers participate in the study. Study participants were college students attending health education classes at a Midwestern community college.

A brief presentation was given during the classes requesting volunteers for participation in the study. Letters and participation forms were given to all students in each class. The researcher read the letter along with the students and addressed all questions that were raised. The letter explained the purpose of the study, conditions of the study, the nature of the participants' involvement in the study, and participants' rights as dictated by Human Subjects Committee. Potential participants were informed refreshments would be provided. To protect volunteers' confidentiality, all potential participants were asked to return their forms to a specified envelope and were advised to keep their copies of the letter for reference.

The first phase of data collection occurred during the summer semester of 2005. Two objectives of the first phase of data collection were to identify community college students' perceptions of and experiences with stress and to identify students' perceptions of and experiences with stressors. To accomplish this objective, two focus groups were conducted. The number of participants involved in a focus group is generally limited from six to 12 members (19). Each focus group in the current study was intended to have six participants. Because one participant did not attend, one focus group contained six participants, and the second group only contained five. Furthermore, one participant in the second focus group was 23 years of age (the researcher allowed this deviation since the age range of traditional university students is 18 to 24). Each focus group was semi-structured to provide a framework for the sessions, while also allowing students the flexibility to freely provide feedback.

Procedures

For the purposes of this study, data were collected primarily through focus groups. Focus groups are informal discussions revolving around a specific topic or issue (20). Focus groups have been used by business organizations to obtain consumer feedback in the development or assessment of a product or service. However, the use of such groups has greatly increased in the planning, implementation, and assessment of programs and services in the public sector (e.g., healthcare, government, education) as well (21).

Although focus groups were employed as the primary method of data collection, the observation of nonverbal communication and behaviors of student participants was a second source of data. Before the occurrence of focus group sessions, a written protocol was prepared to guide observations of the researcher and the research assistant. This protocol specified the participants and potential behaviors to be observed, as well as the conditions of the observation (22). In addition to focus groups and observation, data were collected through Feedback Forms developed by the researcher. Feedback Forms contained questions similar to questions addressed during focus group sessions. These forms allowed participants to freely provide feedback that

they may not otherwise feel comfortable providing during the focus groups, thus enhancing the data collection process. Feedback Forms were distributed at the beginning of each session of data collection and collected at the end of each session.

Prior to the group discussion, participants were instructed to respond to questions given on the Feedback Forms. Because focus group sessions occurred during the class periods, they were 50 minutes in duration. Participants were reminded of the confidentiality of information and encouraged them only to provide information within their comfort levels. Participants' responses were discussed during the remainder of the focus group sessions. During this phase, participants were asked to discuss their perceptions of stress and share the stressors they had experienced as college students.

DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of the first phase of data collection and analysis was to explore community college students' definitions of stress and their identification of stressors.. Triangulation was achieved through multiple data collection methods of focus groups, research and research assistant's observation notes, audio and videocassette recording, and written Feedback Forms. Conceptual analysis determined the frequency with which a concept was mentioned or described. In some cases, the analysis also suggested Feedback Forms gave a voice to passive participants who were less interactive during the focus groups.

The focus groups in the present study produced a tremendous amount of data. Initially, data was transcribed by watching and listening to tape recordings of all focus group sessions and typing all feedback verbatim. Transcriptions and written feedback were thoroughly reviewed.

Although qualitative data is not measured numerically, it must be organized and analyzed in such a way that allows valid conclusions to be drawn. Based on the purpose of the current study as well as the research questions and methods of data collection, content analysis was used to analyze data. According to Palmquist (2005), content analysis "is used to determine the presence of certain words, concepts, themes, phrases, characters, or sentences within texts or sets of texts and to quantify this presence in an objective manner" (23).

Content analysis was the appropriate technique for analyzing the collected data because of the large quantities of textual data gathered through focus groups, observations, and Feedback Forms. Therefore, conceptual analysis was selected for analysis of the data of the current study (24, 23). Conceptual analysis determines the word's existence in a textual passage. This technique can also reflect how many times words or phrases related to themes appear.

The steps of conceptual analysis outlined by Busch et al. (24) were incorporated into the data analysis of the current study. The researcher may code for a single word (e.g., “time”) or relevant phrases (e.g., “In the fall, you take a full load, and it’s all week, and you have to work during the weekends too”) related to a theme (e.g., “Time Limitations”). Elements such as Time Limitations were identified in the review of literature as a Stressor. However, other traits, such as Social Interaction, emerged from the collection of data. The researcher coded for both single words and phrases relating to identified traits (24). After the review of literature and initial review of data, categories or themes were identified (e.g., reactions of stress, types of stressors). Therefore, subsequent data was coded according to these categories. For the purpose of this study, “Financial Limitations” was a stressor identified in the review of literature. The word “financial” was not required to be present for Financial Limitations to be identified if there were any indications of stress related to money, rising costs, or the necessity of employment were present in the data (24).

After initial review of the interview transcripts, observation notes, and Feedback Forms, the researcher categorized the data into different traits or concepts related to stress or stressors. Words or phrases appearing to relate to a particular trait was coded as belonging to that concept (24). For example, if a participant were to describe “cost” as a stressor, the word “cost” would be coded as Financial Limitations because previous literature has identified “cost” as a financial source of stress (11). Again, as traits emerged from the review of literature and Phase One of data collection, operational definitions were developed for each trait (24).

Subsequent data was coded by its direct or indirect reference to one of the aspects of Stress or Stressors (24). For example, the word “cost” would be coded as Financial Limitations. However, any reference to one’s job was also coded as Financial Limitations if the job was presented as a means for earning an income rather than acquiring professional experience. For example, if a participant who is an 18-year-old student at a community college had discussed the stress of a 28-year-old married sibling who was considering returning to school, this data may be relevant for further studies but would not be applicable to the findings of the current study.

For each of the three phases, coding would begin with the Feedback Forms. The Feedback Forms contained valuable textual information that provided first-hand by the participants. This written information would be coded for the categories of Stress and Stressors. Interview and observation transcripts would be coded by the same method (24). In this step, the emerging traits are discussed. The interview transcripts and observation notes are coded, but only those considered significant were included in the analysis. Included data were that which significantly reinforced or deviated from Feedback Form data (24).

Although questions addressed in the Feedback Form and focus groups created themes prior to data collection sessions, additional themes also emerged upon analysis of data. Data were categorized according to the general themes of stress and stressors. After each session, the researcher reviewed the sessions with the research assistant to discuss their observations of the interactions.

RESULTS

Stress Reactions

Described as a Physical Response

On their Feedback Forms, participants describing stress as having a physical component stated stress as a “physical strain”, “physical problem”, “physical result” or “physical feeling”. One participant explained stress as “a way in which our bodies react to dilemmas, internal and external.” Although several participants defined stress as having a physical component on their Feedback Forms, only one male participant discussed the physical aspects of stress during the focus group, as he stated, “I just said it was another way of saying mentally and physically-wise your body’s having a bad day.”

The written responses indicate the participants’ acknowledgement of stress as a physiological process, but lack of discussion of its possible effects on the body suggest participants may not consider it a significant health issue.

Described as a Psychological Response

In this case, specific psychological symptoms were reported, including worry, irritability, anger, withdrawal, being upset, and frustration:

Well, if you have a lot of things to do, like you have exams that week... I hate when people are trying to interrupt you all the time. And if you’re at a job and you’re really busy, you get irritated at people when they interrupt you when you’re doing something.

“The littlest things will set me off, even if it’s just my sister asking me to wear my shirt, something like that. I’m like, “No, get away!” (Laughs).

“I usually shut down. I just go into my room and want to be left alone.”

While some participants took the “fight” approach of the fight-or-flight response and projected their feelings externally, this participant took “flight” by physically removing herself to escape the perceived threat.

Described as a Stressor

Such definitions included the following: “anything that may cause you to worry or it’s a feeling of having too much to do with not a lot of time to do it for me,” “anything that may cause someone to get upset or frustrated,” and “things that cause us to worry or become almost irritable.” The constructs of “stress” and a “stressor” may be used interchangeably by community college

students. Educators and health professionals must clarify the concept of “stress” for students are made aware of stress as a physical and psychological reaction which can have detrimental effects on their health if not managed with healthy coping strategies.

Stressors

The community college students participating in the current study identified numerous stressors which were congruent with the stressors identified by university college students in previous literature. These stressors included Time Limitations, Lack of Sleep, Demands of College, Financial Limitations, and Social Demands. However, several stressors such as Commute to School, Extracurricular Activities were unique to the students participating in the current study.

Time Limitations

The lives of community college students are often filled with numerous responsibilities. As suggested in the previous literature, students may struggle with the completion of multiple tasks in a limited amount of time. The responses of several participants in the current study were consistent with the perception of feeling overwhelmed reported by the American College Health Association (2006):

“It’s anything that may cause you to worry. And for me it’s like not having enough time to do what I want. Like if I have so much to do and not enough time.”

“In the fall, you take a full load, and it’s all week, and you have to work during the weekends too.”

Anxiety seems to be a common psychological reaction to stressors. For many community college students, one factor contributing to their perceived limitation in time is the drive, or commute, to and from school.

Commute to School

Four participants responded the commute to college was a stressor. The challenges of commuting to school included the drive to school and being on time for class. One male described his commute to college as a significant stressor, as he indicated,

“Getting to and from school is also sometimes a challenge because I live far away from here. There’s a lot of traffic. I take the back way home so I don’t have to go through all the traffic.”

Because community colleges are not residential, the requirement of commuting may contribute to the stress of college life. Issues such as traffic jams, road rage, cellular phones, and rising oil prices significantly affect commuting students financially as well as physically and emotionally. The perceptions of limited time for traveling as well as limited parking available may trigger stress before even entering the doors of the college.

Lack of Sleep

Lack of sleep seemed to be a result of the excessive demands of school, family, friends, work, and extracurricular activities. One female participant stated one stressor for her was trying to meet the demands of others and feeling like she had no time for herself before she went to bed.

I have a big problem with people asking so much of me that I don't have enough time for myself. I'll be so busy all the way up until it's time to go to bed. By the time it's time to go to bed, I don't have time to go and prep myself for bed. I just crash on the bed. You know, I don't have enough time for myself... I can't read or you know... I have so many other things going on.

Extracurricular Activities

Community college students tend to participate in activities outside of school for recreational purposes. Extracurricular activities include sports, clubs, and hobbies which do not influence students' grades. Although these activities may relieve stress symptoms for some students, their time and energy requirement may be a source of stress for others.

A 21-year-old female stated she had "too many outside activities." One male stated he played soccer, and another reported he was "on tour with the drama company." The participants agreed that while they enjoyed these activities, success in these endeavors required a great deal of time and energy. Consequently, these extracurricular activities may actually become sources of stress for some participants rather than a method for coping with stress.

Financial Limitations

Although community college may be more affordable than a four-year university, many students may still be concerned about the rising costs of tuition and books. Four participants identified money as a stressor. Money issues were described in terms of "money problems", "[cost of] tuition", "[cost of] textbooks", and "finding work".

Community college students may search for part-time or full-time employment to meet their expenses. However, even a part-time job requires a commitment of time and energy. Three participants identified their jobs were stressors for them, indicating that participants may perceive employment as a financial necessity while also perceiving it to be an interference with their academic endeavors.

Decisions Concerning the Future

While some participants identified the short-term stressors of demanding course loads, two female participants were concerned about the transition after graduation from community college. Declaring a major may be a common stressor for college students, as it not only dictates their required curricula in their community college, but also courses they must take if they make the eventual decision to enroll at a four-year university or college. One female participant confirmed this, as she stated,

“Sometimes I stress out about my major when I study once I go on from here because I’m switching between a couple of them.”

Family

Because community colleges do not provide on-campus housing, students may reside with their families while they attend classes. Although this living arrangement appears to benefit students in terms of emotional and financial support, four of eleven participants identified their families could be sources of stress. One male participant who lived several hundred miles from his family sometimes felt as if he were being “nagged” by his mother’s frequent telephone calls despite his independent lifestyle.

While many community college students are supported by their families, a growing number of students may be supporting children of their own. These college students have the additional stressor of meeting the excessive demands of college while also meeting the needs of their dependents. One female participant shared the stress of being a single parent:

...my two-year-old ‘s schedule conflicting with my schedule, the fact that I have 12 [credit] hours in the summer, trying to hang out with my friends but screwing up my other obligations, and I have to still go through family court.

Social Demands

The theme of Social Demands was subcategorized into “Friends” and “Dating Relationships”. The stressor of friends was generally expressed in the context of trying to maintain social networks or friendships while also fulfilling the requirements of college. One male student describes the pressure he feels to maintain an active social life while attending classes and holding several part-time jobs:

I just also think as a college student you don’t give your body rest. It’s like you’re always doing something. You just can’t sit in one spot. If you do sit in one spot, your phone is always ringing.

Discussion and Conclusions

Although stress has been recognized as a significant health issue for the population of university students, there is limited research addressing the effects of stress on community college students. This may be due to an assumption that the stress and stressors of the population of community college students is almost identical to those students attending universities or four-year colleges. However, the current study suggests that despite the similarities between the two populations, community college students have unique perceptions of and experiences with stress and stressors which necessitate attention by health educators as well as community college faculty and administrators.

Students participating in the present study seemed to acknowledge the physical and psychological effects of stress. Their responses to these specif-

ic issues were generally consistent with those provided by university students in previous literature. However, because of the seemingly limited availability of resources for community college students in the assessment of their own stress and stressors, these students may experience difficulty identifying and addressing their own stress and therefore may be unaware of its potential effects on their health status, including their physical health. Consequently, they may be unable to cope with their stress, which may compromise their physical, psychological, and academic well-being.

In general, stressors described by the participants in the current study including time and financial limitations, academic challenges, and social challenges were also similar to those cited by university students in previous investigations (11, 9, 5). However, the previous literature as well as the findings of the present study suggest community colleges may not be adequately equipped for facilitating students' ability to cope with these stressors. For example, participants in the current study frequently addressed the physical components of stress. Therefore, community colleges may educate students concerning exercise as a healthy coping strategy for mitigating the physical symptoms of stress; then, they may offer exercise classes designed to specifically to decrease specific physical symptoms of stress (e.g., a yoga class to release stress-related headaches and tension in the neck and back).

An additional finding of note in the current study is the participants' identification of the stressors: commuting and parking issues, transition after two years of colleges, and life with their families of origin. Although these findings may occur to some degree among the population of university students, they may occur to an even greater extent in the community college population (primarily due to the commuting requirement of all community college students). However, these specific stressors may be overlooked by community college faculty and administrators due to time and resource constraints (13, 5). As with university students (7), community college students' inability to cope with these stressors may not only have deleterious effects on their health but also result in their inability to successfully complete their coursework and ultimately their having to withdraw from the college.

Because research concerning the stress reactions and stressors of the community college student population is limited, additional qualitative research may provide valuable insight into the effects of stress on this population, as well as the causes of these reactions. The perceived stress and stressors of these students must become a priority of community college educators as well as health educators, as they may result in a potential decline in college retention rates as well as the physical and psychological health of the students. Fortunately, during the time of the current study, participants did not indicate they had been experiencing severe stress-related physical or psychological illness or that they had been considering withdrawing from school; however, with early identification of their stress reactions and stressors, these students

may succeed in performing the necessary task as stated by Erikson (1) of “mak[ing] a series of ever narrowing selections of personal, occupational, sexual, and ideological commitments”.

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Address for correspondence:

Maureen Johnson
Indiana State University
e-mail: Maureen.johnson@indstate.edu

