High expectations for higher education? Perceptions of college and experiences of stress prior to and through the college career.

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HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION? PERCEPTIONS OF COLLEGE AND EXPERIENCES OF STRESS PRIOR TO AND THROUGH THE COLLEGE CAREER

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Increasing numbers of students are experiencing difficulty adjusting to college. Violated expectations of college may increase the stress experienced across the college career. Therefore, 36 college students were assessed prior to matriculation, during the first year and during the senior year. Expectations and experiences of academics, social life, family involvement, and satisfaction with the chosen college were compared. Students' experiences generally did not differ from their expectations, except regarding increased involvement with family. Violated expectations of academic demands predicted stress during the first and senior years. Violated expectations regarding social experiences predicted stress in the vulnerable first year.

Going to college represents a significant developmental milestone, requiring students to adjust to the academic challenges, increased levels of independence, separation from friends and family, and new role expectations. This transition can be a source of stress for many individuals, some of whom find the collegiate experience fails to meet their expectations (Stern, 1966; Tinto, 1987; Holmbeck & Wandrei, 1993; Gerdes & Pallinckrodt, 1994; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1996). Difficulty adjusting to the demands of college can lead to early withdrawal. Two decades ago, some estimates suggested 30-40% of college students could be expected to drop out before earning a degree (Tinto, 1987; Levitz & Noel, 1989). More recent data indicate that this number is increasing. Federal data show that 46% of students entering four-year colleges in 1997 had failed to earn a degree six years later (AP, 2005). In addition, reported stress levels of college students have increased (Altschuler, 2000). The number of first year students who report feeling 'overwhelmed' has almost doubled and some colleges are reporting that use of counseling and psychological services has gone up by one third (Shatkin, 2007).

One potential source of stress that has been considered is the unrealistic or unrealized expectations of first year college students. Failing to meet their somewhat idealistic expectations has been associated with academic ambivalence, failure, and early withdrawal from college (Baker, McNeil, & Siryk, 1985; Jackson, Pancer, Pratt, & Hunsberger, 2000). Research in this area has focused largely on students' academic expectations (e.g., courses, level of preparation) and academic outcomes (e.g., failure, dropout). This longitudinal study aims to expand this research by comparing students' expectations and experiences of college in broader domains and examining the relationship between violated expectations and stress. Students' expectations prior to matriculation and their perceptions during the first and fourth years were compared. Students' perceptions of academics, social life, relationships with parents, and satisfaction with their chosen college were assessed.
First Year Myth

Many students have unrealistically optimistic expectations of college, identified by Stern as the Freshman Myth (1966). These idealistic expectations can rarely be met. Students who show higher discrepancies between expectations and actual experiences may become disillusioned and be more vulnerable to drop out (e.g., Baker, et al., 1985; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). However, only about one third of the sample in a more recent study were found to have overly optimistic expectations (Jackson, et al., 2000). The First Year Myth may be less dramatic now as students have multiple sources of information about college life and the specific colleges they have chosen to attend. For example, it is not uncommon for students to visit colleges and speak with current students about their experiences. However, even if the difference between expectation and experience is small, it can have a meaningful impact on stress levels in an already vulnerable population. Also, the accuracy of students’ expectations is likely to differ across domain. For example, Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) reported that expectations about academics and social life may be more optimistic than expectations about one’s own adjustment.

Academic, Social and Family Adjustment

Academic preparation, ability, and adjustment are central issues in evaluating college success, stress, and the likelihood of early withdrawal (Levitz & Noel, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Daugherty & Lane, 1999). Rickinson and Rutherford (1996) conducted interviews in which withdrawing students reported difficulties with academic adjustment. Whether a student withdrew or continued with their education was dependent on their ability to adjust to the new academic demands.

The central role of academics in the adjustment to college is consistent across ability levels. For example, top high school students who find themselves in competitive universities may experience unanticipated struggle. These students expect to do well, but may be unaccustomed to having to put forth effort or to utilize resources (e.g., advisors, tutors) to succeed (Wratcher, 1991). They are unfamiliar with the lack of structure and the amount of work required outside of the classroom. These students may experience academic failure or disappointment for the first time in college.

Social factors, such as forming a social network, may be as important as academic factors in predicting early withdrawal and adjustment difficulties (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). Entering college requires students learn about new social norms and required behaviors, adopt identity or group affiliation, and manage new social freedoms (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Shatkin, 2007). Daugherty and Lane (1999) found that withdrawing students had reported more social alienation than graduating students. Peers have been identified as a critical influence on college outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Peers can influence attitudes about both positive (e.g., academic achievement) and negative behaviors (e.g., drinking, cheating) directly related to collegiate success (Renn & Arnold, 2003).

At the same time that students are adjusting to new academic and social demands, they are separating from their parents and family. Separation and individuation from parents are crucial developmental tasks affecting their adjustment to college. Kenny (1987) reports that most first year students continue to be close with parents and receive emotional support from them. They are somewhat conflicted, however, in this relationship. They rely on parents for support, but are sometimes embarrassed by the relationship. They may be financially dependent on parents, but are responsible for their own personal needs (e.g., laundry, nutrition, personal choices). They
find themselves independent of parental rules and restrictions, but may also feel they must maintain this independence even when they might like to seek help or guidance.

**Present Study**

Previous research has compared students’ anticipated and actual experiences of college. For example, Baker, McNeil, and Siryk (1985) found that students were less positive about academic and social aspects, but fairly accurate about their personal and emotional adjustment. Other studies have examined the relationship between expectations and adjustment problems. Jackson, et al. asked students open-ended questions addressing what they expected of college life, their schoolwork, and their social lives (2000). Based on the responses, students were assigned to one of four categories descriptive of their expectations (optimistic, prepared, fearful, complacent). This categorization was predictive of adjustment, with prepared students being most successful.

This study differs from the previous in several ways. First, in contrast to Jackson (2000), students’ expectations were assessed in specific areas (e.g., the work load will be difficult for me to handle, I will not get “homesick”). In a manner similar to Baker, et al. (1985), these expectations are then directly compared to experiences in the first and fourth year of college. However, rather than simply comparing expectations to experience, this study determines whether those violated expectations are associated with increased distress. In addition, previous studies did not include students’ expectations of or perceptions of involvement with their parents.

**Hypotheses**

In contrast to the idea of the First Year Myth, we expected that students would vary in the accuracy of their expectations. Thus, some students would find the collegiate experience more satisfactory than anticipated, while others would be somewhat disappointed. Overall, we predicted that violated expectations would be associated with higher stress. Specifically, we expected that finding the academic experience more rigorous than expected, being less involved socially than expected, and being less satisfied with the chosen college than expected would be associated with higher stress. Because of the ambivalent feelings college students may have about their relationship with their parents, we did not expect violations in the family domain to increase stress. If students had less contact with parents than expected, they may accept this as part of the individuation and separation process.

In addition, we expected that levels of stress would be lower prior to the start of college. However, first and senior year students were expected to report similar levels of stress. Senior year students were expected to report higher levels of satisfaction with the chosen college, their academic performance, and their social lives. Senior year students were also expected to be less involved with their parents.

**Method**

**Participants**

Data were initially collected from 99 incoming first year students during the summer prior to matriculation. Participants had been admitted to a small, selective, liberal arts college located in a rural Midwestern community. This sample represented approximately 23% of the incoming class. During the Fall semester of the first year, 47 females and 17 males (N = 66) from the original sample participated. The majority of the participants were white (82%) and educated in the public school system (65%). During the Fall semester of the senior year, 36 of these students (28 females and 8 males) continued their participation. An additional 11 participants from the original summer sample completed the senior year assessment.
Participants who completed the survey did not differ from the original sample on any of the demographic measures. In addition, there were no differences between the original sample and those who chose to complete the study on measures of stress, academics, satisfaction with the chosen college, or family involvement. However, members of the subgroup who completed the study (providing data at all three assessments) reported higher social involvement ($M = 2.47$, $SD = .36$) than the original sample ($M = 2.3$, $SD = .33$), $t(92) = -2.38$, $p < .05$.

Measures

Students received the Incoming Student Expectations Questionnaire (ISEQ) during the summer assessment prior to matriculation. This survey, designed for this study, assesses expectations in four domains: academic preparation and requirements (Academics, e.g., “Academically, I am ready for college”); the quality and quantity of contact with family (Family, e.g., “I will miss my parents”); social involvement (Social, e.g., “It will be easy for me to make new friends”); and issues specific to the college (College, e.g., satisfaction with “Course offerings”). Items require students to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale the extent of their satisfaction with (College subscale) or agreement with various statements (Academics, Family, and Social subscales). High scores indicate satisfaction with the College, involvement with family, importance of social life, and academic preparation. Chronbach’s alpha for the College subscale was .6, reflecting the wide range of collegiate issues included in this subscale (e.g., dormitory accommodations to computer labs). Reliability was much higher for the Academic, Family, and Social subscales (.9, .84, and .87, respectively).

Students completed the Student Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ) at the first year and senior year assessments. In this survey, each item from the ISEQ is rephrased to assess the experiences of students. For example, “the workload will be difficult for me to handle” became “the workload is difficult for me to handle.” Internal consistency for the Academic, Family, Social, and College subscales at the senior year assessment were .88, .85, .82, and .64, respectively.

Students completed the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) at all three assessments. The BSI is a 53-item self-report symptom inventory designed to assess psychological symptoms in both inpatient and noninpatient respondents (Derogatis, 1992). These items were chosen from the SCL-90-R as the most representative of nine primary symptom dimensions (Derogatis, 1983). The items combine to form nine scales: Somatization, Obsessive-Compulsive, Interpersonal Sensitivity, Depression, Anxiety, Hostility, Phobic Anxiety, Paranoid Ideation, and Psychoticism. Items are also summed across subscales to provide a global index of distress, the General Severity Index (GSI), which will be used here. Internal consistencies for the nine symptom dimensions range from .71 to .85. Test-retest coefficients for these nine dimensions range from .68 to .91, and for the GSI range from .8 to .9 (Derogatis and Lazarus, 1999). In this study the internal consistency of the GSI ranged from .94-.96 across assessments. These scores were used to compare the stress symptoms of students across the college experience.

Procedures

During the summer assessment, all admitted students received consent forms and surveys in a packet of information they received from the Admissions Office of the college. Consent forms and surveys were returned by mail, in separate envelopes to maintain confidentiality of responses. During the first year and senior year assessments (both in the Fall of the respective years), consent forms and surveys were mailed to all original participants, who were asked to complete and return the materials.
Table 1. Comparing expectations and experiences across the college career

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Expectations</th>
<th>Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>First Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>M 2.30 SD .50</td>
<td>M 2.39 SD 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>M 2.46 SD .35</td>
<td>M 2.45 SD .44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>M 2.78a SD .61</td>
<td>M 2.94b SD .55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>M 3.73 SD .32</td>
<td>M 3.62 SD .49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSI</td>
<td>M .45a SD .35</td>
<td>M .65b SD .41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* indicates significance at p < .05
** indicates significance at p < .001

Note. Means with different subscripts differ significantly at p < .05.

Results

First Year Myth?

Table 1 shows comparisons of expectations prior to matriculation and experiences during the first and senior year in each domain. Repeated measures ANOVA revealed significant differences for Family, F(2, 70) = 3.2, p < .05, with students reporting more involvement with family during the first (M = 2.94, SD = .55) and senior (M = 3.00, SD = .61) than they expected prior to matriculation (M = 2.78, SD = .61). There were no differences in any other domain between expectations and experiences. In addition, there were no differences between first and senior year ratings in the Family, Social, Academic or College domains. Stress scores (BSI) were also compared over time and were higher in the first (M = .65, SD = .41) and senior years (M = .65, SD = .49) than prior to matriculation (M = .45, SD = .35), F(2, 70) = 8.1, p < .001 (see Figure 1). Again, there was no change in reported stress from the first to senior year.

Violated Expectations in the First Year

Expectations were compared to first year experiences in each domain. Difference scores were calculated for each by subtracting first year scores from summer scores. Though the only disparity between expectations and
Table 2. Correlations among difference scores (between summer and first year assessment)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Academics</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>BSI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>N=63</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>.054</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>N=63</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>-.026</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>N=56</td>
<td>N=57</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>.073</td>
<td>.116</td>
<td>-.180</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=61</td>
<td>N=62</td>
<td>N=55</td>
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<tr>
<td>BSI</td>
<td>.503**</td>
<td>-.092</td>
<td>.348*</td>
<td>.126</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<td></td>
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* indicates significance at p<.05
** indicates significance at p<.001

experiences was for the Family domain (as seen in Table 1), these difference scores were not correlated with BSI change scores (pre-test minus posttest scores; see Table 2). In contrast, the difference between Academic expectations and experiences was significantly correlated with BSI change scores, \( r(50) = .503, p < .001 \), as was the difference between Social expectations and experiences, \( r(49) = .348, p < .05 \). When the academic and social experiences were better than expected, students reported an associated decrease in stress.

Regression analyses indicate that the difference between expectations and experiences in the Social domain was a significant predictor of posttest BSI scores, \( t(52) = -2.171, p < .05 \), while the differences in the Academic and Family domains were not. When students report being happier with the social experience than they expected to be, their general stress level is lower.

**Predicting Stress in the Senior Year**

During the senior year, lower scores on the Academic \( [r(45) = -.50, p < .01] \) and Family \( [r(45) = -.30, p < .05] \) subscales were associated with higher BSI scores (see Table 3). The more difficulty students report within the academic domain, the higher their reported stress. In addition, separation from, or lack of involvement with parents was associated with higher stress.

Differences between expectations and senior year ratings of academics predicted senior year BSI scores, \( t(39) = -2.74, p < .01 \). Students who were less positive about their academics during the senior year than they had expected to be (prior to matriculation) reported higher stress. As mentioned previously, the difference between first and senior year satisfaction with the chosen college was not significant. However, this difference was predictive of stress in the senior year, \( t(26) = -2.86, p < .01 \). A decrease in satisfaction with the chosen school over the college career was associated with increased stress.

**Discussion**

**Summary of Findings**

We expected that students would vary in the accuracy of their expectations. Like Stern (1966) we imagined that some students would demonstrate the First Year Myth and have idealistic expectations of college. However, today’s college students are much more likely
Table 3. Correlations among domain scores and stress during the senior year (N = 47).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Academics</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>BSI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>.187</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>.213</td>
<td>-.027</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>.084</td>
<td>.078</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSI</td>
<td>-.497**</td>
<td>-.295*</td>
<td>.163</td>
<td>.103</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* indicates significance at p<.05
** indicates significance at p<.001

to gather information about their chosen college from various sources (e.g., friends, internet, college visits) and to gather information about the collegiate experience from various sources (e.g., media, guidance counselors, friends, and family members). These multiple resources may lead to more realistic, or cautiously optimistic, expectations. Overall, we found that students were fairly accurate in their assessment of their academic preparation and performance, as well as their social interactions. This finding is supported by other research indicating less uniformly optimistic views of college (Jackson, et al., 2000). Students’ expectations were violated, however, regarding involvement with their parents. Students maintained higher levels of involvement with their parents than expected.

Even though we did not expect large differences between expectations and experiences, we predicted that if an individual’s expectations were violated, then he or she would report more symptoms of stress. As hypothesized, correlations between Academic and Social change scores and BSI change scores suggest that when the academic and social experiences were worse than expected, students reported an associated increase in stress. Regression analyses predicting stress scores from difference scores in the Social domain show that when students report being happier with the social experience than they expected to be, their general stress level is lower. These findings are consistent with research on the important role of academics and social experiences in the adjustment to college (e.g., Levitz & Noel, 1986; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994).

When expectations are violated in a positive direction, such as having more involvement with parents than expected, increases in stress would not be anticipated. While students in this sample reported higher levels of involvement with parents, they did not report associated increases in stress as a result. It is likely that students planning for their transition to college will expect, and perhaps look forward to, great separation from their parents. As college students, they may be somewhat surprised to discover that they are still dependent on parents in many ways (Wratcher, 1991). As part of the individuation process, they may also begin to see their parents as people and increasingly seek their advice and involvement (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). College students may find they separate and individuate from parents in ways that maintain emotional closeness (Beyers, Goossens, Vansant, & Moors, 2003)

As predicted, levels of reported stress were higher during college than prior to the start of college. Students reported similar levels of stress during the first and senior years. Contrary to our expectations, students did not differ from first year to senior year in their reported satisfaction with the chosen college, their academic performance, their social lives, or their involvement with their
parents. However, this was consistent with previous research indicating that the largest adjustment occurs in the first year (Baker, et al., 1985). Despite the relative consistency in stress levels, violated expectations regarding academics continued to predict higher stress.

**Limitations of the Current Study**

This study was conducted at a small, highly selective, liberal arts college. The level of preparation and the typical adjustment of these students may differ from other types of schools. For example, student adjustment, and the resultant low attrition rate, may be related to the resources available to the admissions office to ensure a good fit between incoming students and the college. Future research should include large and small colleges and universities, comparing also the experiences of two- and four-year colleges.

This study began with 23% of the incoming students participating. By the senior year, the sample represented only 8.5% of the original class of incoming students (36% of the original sample). This level of attrition may not be unusual in a longitudinal study; but, given the small number of students admitted to the college each year, the final sample of participants completing all three assessments was quite small. However, this small sample did not differ, demographically, from the original sample and, on outcome measures, differed only in terms of social expectations.

In the future, it may be useful to assess stress with a measure more specific to the experiences of college students. In this study, first and fourth year students reported similar levels of stress. But, these two groups of students may experience different types of stress that may come from different sources. First year students' stress may come from the transition to college, while seniors are struggling with the transition to adulthood and future planning.

**Implications**

The results of the first year comparison suggest that the transition to college is more than an academic experience and that expectations of other factors, specifically the social environment, contribute to overall stress. Examining stress during the senior year suggests that current academic challenges and the relationship with parents play important roles.

This study suggests that researchers maintain a focus on academics, including the role of violated expectations (as violated expectations predicted stress during first and senior years). In addition, both researchers and those counseling students should expand the view of this transition to include expectations and experiences of social and familial interactions. This study indicated that violated expectations regarding social experience predict stress in the vulnerable first year and found that students maintain higher levels of parental involvement than anticipated. This information could be particularly useful for reducing stress and preventing related academic failure due to feelings of isolation among incoming students. Programs geared toward bonding first year students together (e.g., pre-orientation readings, orientation service projects) may contribute to increased feelings of social connectedness; which may reduce stress. In addition, helping students to recognize that the individuation process does not require that they separate from parents may allow students to seek advice and support from parents earlier.

Decreased satisfaction with the college over the four years increased reported stress. It will be important to determine if this is unique to this college and this sample. Can satisfaction with the college be maintained or is the First-year Myth necessarily debunked? Do students become jaded by knowledge of and experience in their college environment? These results suggest that college
administrators need to monitor the academic and social adjustment of their students, as well as satisfaction with their experiences. To minimize violated expectations, administrators may need to make efforts to present a more realistic image of the collegiate experience.

References