

Resilience & Emotional Intelligence between First Generation College Students and Non-First Generation College Students

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Abstract

The study compared the levels of resilience and emotional intelligence between first generation college students and non-first generation college students. Data from a total of 100 participants (74 female and 26 male) indicated that first generation college students exhibit higher levels of resilience than non-first generation students. Additionally, first generation college students expressed lower levels of emotional intelligence than non-first generation college students. Academic achievement measured by GPA and academic year did not make a difference in either levels of resilience and emotional intelligence.

Key words: first generation college students, resilience, emotional intelligence

According to a report from the U. S Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) by Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, first-generation college students (FGS) are considered those undergraduate students whose parents never enrolled in postsecondary education (1998). The First Generation Foundation states that being a first generation college student is one of the most cited predictors of failure and that nationally, 89 percent of low-income first-generation college students leave college within six years without a

degree (p. 43). A report, from the University of North Carolina (UNC Office of Undergraduate Retention, 2014), showed that the barriers to completion include insufficient academic preparation, limited college knowledge, cultural conflict, limited familial support and financial constraints.

The high attrition rate may be the result of a lack of background knowledge. First generation college students may be uninformed in many areas related to being a college student, including degrees, study habits and others factors which may cause difficulties in accomplishing the goal of earning a college degree. First generation college students may lack appropriate information, resources, guidelines, and other important tools to help them navigate the college arena. They might also need to develop psychological and emotional mechanisms to balance and manage the many stressors involved in academic performance in order to avoid dropping out. First generation college students might need psychological and emotional tools to support them with the stress and difficulties of dealing with these implications, and living as college students with a limited background of experience of college life (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

Non- first generation college students have parents who are familiar with postsecondary education; therefore, they have different backgrounds and experiences related to college. This study analyzed the levels of resilience and emotional intelligence of first generation college students and non - first generation college students. This study also compared emotional intelligence and resilience of first generation college students between the academic years. This study also examined the relationship of GPA with resilience and emotional intelligence.

First generation college students must adapt academically and socially to their new institution. While many students may not have trouble making this transition, others may encounter conflict between the cultures of their families/friends and their new college. How first generation students negotiate these conflicts may influence their ultimate success (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Therefore, this study provided insight, which will help coaches, professors, staff, counselors and advisors who work with first generations college students. In addition, bringing awareness of first generation college students concerns to parents, high school counselors, teachers, and other professionals may influence the first generation college students' preparation prior to college life.

This study considers two psychological variables, resilience and emotional intelligence. These variables could be tools to overcome stressful and difficult situations. Armstrong, Galligan, and Critchley (2011) showed that most people with higher emotional intelligence scores reported fewer stressful events caused distress. Psychologically resilient people are effectively able to use positive emotions to their advantage (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2002) and to produce beneficial outcomes (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Fredrickson, 2000, Magnano, Craparo & Paolillo, 2016).

This study explores how levels of resilience and emotional intelligence can function as tools in the achievement of goals of first generation college students, and compares how these tools impact other groups of students whose parents are more educated. First generation students are college students who come from a family in which neither parent has earned a four-year undergraduate degree (UNC Office of Undergraduate Retention, 2014).

Schneider, Lyons, and Khazon (2013) studied the relationship between emotional intelligence and resilience, demonstrating that these variables influence each other. Their research indicates that emotional intelligence facilitates resilient responses including challenge appraisals, as well as more positive and less negative affect.

Schoon (2006), Ungar (2008), and Huang and Lin (2013) define resilience as the positive

capacity of people to cope with stress and adversity. Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to recognize, assess, and control one's emotion, as well as the emotions of others. It also allows people to handle high-pressure situations, as are often experienced in higher education (Chapin, 2015). Consequently, emotional intelligence is a tool that students may develop during college years because emotional intelligence can also be considered as the relationship between cognition and emotional systems based on knowledge earned from experiences.

First Generation

A longitudinal study, by Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998), looked at academic and social integration of first generation college students compared with their peers. The population of their study included students who were enrolled for the first time in postsecondary education during the 1989 to 1990 academic year, and followed up in 1992 and 1994. The outcomes of the study showed that First Generation Students (FGS) had lower levels of academic integration than others. The NCES study reported, in their statistical analysis, that FGS often have family and background characteristics that are associated with a risk for attrition. Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin also concluded that first generation college student are more likely to be from lower income families have experienced lower achievement, and have lower overall degree aspirations than their peers. Therefore, first generation college students may experience more stress during their lives and need to develop more tools to motivate themselves.

A report from University of North Carolina (UNC Office of Undergraduate Retention, 2014) showed that in the United States, FGS are 38.2% Hispanics, 22.6% African American, 16.8% Native American, 19% Asian, and 13.2% Caucasian (p.40). They also indicated that at the University of North Carolina, 19% of the undergraduate students are FGS. A breakdown by gender indicated that 38% are male and 62% are female. The report specified that among their university first generation college student population 34% are African American, 30% are Hispanics, 30% are American Indian, 25% are Asian, 25% are students with two or more races, and 14% are white students (p.53). In addition, the report showed that while FGS presented a higher GPA during their third year, 48.6% of first generation college students were declared academically ineligible in the first year at college (p. 37).

The perceived reasons for academic distress among first generation students include a lack of awareness of university resources, limited adult or parental guidance, the need to be a caregiver to a family member, pressure related to a sense of obligation to other/family, a lack of strong academic preparation/ high school rigor, depression/anxiety, financial stress, identification and peer relations. All these reasons can be associated with the development of resources like resilience and emotional intelligence to overcome stressful experiences that require a management of emotions.

Resilience

According to Avey, Luthans, & Jensen (2009), resilient individuals are better prepared to deal with stressors in a constantly changing environment. They are also open to new experiences, flexible to changing demands, and more emotionally stable when facing adversity. Therefore, a moderate to high resilience may enhance the performance of first generation students during college life, permitting them to achieve their goals and handle the pressures of exams, projects, classes, economic stressors, social pressure and other factors that may distract a college student.

Jowkar, Kojuri, Kohoulat, and Hayat (2014), conducted a study focused on the predictors and outcomes of academic resilience. Academic resilience outcomes can be categorized into external factors like social support, caring relations, high expectations and encouragement for participation in meaningful activities, associated with positive development outcomes. The study had 626 participants and used the Resilience and Youth Development Module (RYDM). The study found that academic resilience could be predicted by high school, and that goal orientation was useful in predicting academic resilience.

Cassidy (2015) identified academic resilience as an amplified possibility of academic success despite environmental hardships. Academic resilience was measured as a context in relation to an adverse situation and relevant adaptive responses and associated with self-efficacy. The questionnaires used were the General Academic Self- Efficacy Scale (GASE) by Eachus (1993) and the Academic Resilience Scale-30 (ARS-30) found in Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). Other demographic variables were considered, such as age and gender. The total sample consisted of 435 undergraduate students. Results showed an association of self – efficacy as a predictor of academic resilience, as well as a positive correlation between the two variables and higher self-efficacy, reported significantly higher academic resilience.

E. Erdogan, Ozdogan, and Erdogan (2015) studied the relationship between levels of resilience and gender in university students. This study had a population of 594 university students: 216 males and 378 females. The scale utilized was the “Resiliency Scale” (Gürgan, 2006). Results of this study yielded a statistically significant difference between sexes. Male students showed higher levels of resilience when they were exposed to adversities compared with female students.

Hartley (2011) examined the relationships between resilience, mental health, and academic persistence in undergraduate college students. The study was performed with a sample of 499 participants with a mean age of 21.03 years. The instrument used to measure resilience was the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) developed by Connor & Davidson (2003). The outcomes showed that resilience factors are related to academic persistence and mental health promotion in higher education.

In summary, resilience is significantly related to positive outcomes in the areas of social support, high expectations and positive development. Resilience also increases the likelihood of success despite adversity and is important in predicting academic persistence and mental health. Furthermore, it has been shown that gender differences may exist with males presenting higher resilience when they are exposed to adversities. Therefore, resilience could be a fundamental tool for first generation college students and their goal orientation to achieve their goals and develop the skills to have a successful academic career.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence may also be directly connected to resilience, such that emotionally intelligent behavior in stressful circumstances is adaptive (Armstrong et al., 2011). Therefore, emotional intelligence is important to study among first generation college students along with their process of adaptation and development during college life. These constructs could be a key to managing emotions and maintaining goal orientation.

According to Schneider et al. (2013), emotional intelligence generates the ability and use of emotions to enhance thinking, including altering emotions to redirect cognitive processes,

obtain new perspectives, and enhance problem-solving or creativity. The study examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and resilience. The population of the study included a total of 126 students with 60% of females and 67% freshman and 70% Caucasian. They utilized the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) to measure emotional intelligence. The outcomes of the study showed emotional intelligence abilities facilitated resilient stress responses including challenge appraisals, more positive and less negative affect, and challenge physiology of men and women. Also, they found that the influence of emotional intelligence on stress responses is not global, however generally emotional intelligence improved stress resilience. This research also demonstrated the benefits of emotional intelligence abilities for both men and women.

A study conducted by Codier and Odell (2014) examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and grade point average (GPA). The study was performed with a sample of 72 undergraduate nursing students, 90% of whom were females, between 19 to 54 years old with a mean age of 24 years old. The instrument used was the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test, version 2 (MSCEIT v2; Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, Sitarenios, 2003) and the school board provided the GPA. A Pearson's correlation was used to analyze the relationship between GPA and emotional intelligence. A significant correlation was found between these two variables. The students had a mean GPA score of 3.67. The results showed that 22% of the nursing students scored above average in emotional intelligence, and 48% of the sample perceived and demonstrated emotion (p. 610). The study showed that the relationship between emotional intelligence, academic performance, and workplace performance was not very well understood. It was concluded that emotional intelligence could improve with the addition of skill building activities in the basic curriculum, in this case nursing.

Fernandez, Salamonson, and Griffiths (2012) examined the association between emotional intelligence and learning styles and their influence on academic performance. According to Cooper and Petrides (2010), the sample contained a total of 81 undergraduate students using the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire – Short Form (TEIQue – SF). Contrary to other studies that found a relationship between academic performance and emotional intelligence, this study found that the correlation between the two variables had a minimal association. The authors concluded that the link between emotional intelligence and academic success has significant implications for nursing education in terms of the incorporation of emotional intelligence skills in the contemporary nursing curriculum to better achieve their required competencies.

In conclusion, emotional intelligence influences the ability to think and participate in the cognitive processes, helping to obtain new perspectives and enhance problem solving. Emotional intelligence also serves as a positive tool during stressful situations. These tools benefit the students' the GPA, and can be built as skills that lead to achieving required competencies and improved academic success.

Method

Design

The current study was a quantitative, non-experimental design to evaluate differences and relationships in levels of resilience and emotional intelligence between first generation students and non- first generation college students. In addition, this study examined the relationship

between GPA and emotional intelligence and resilience in first generation college students. The study compared the levels of resilience and emotional intelligence of first generation college students between first academic year and latter academic years. The data was analyzed with a correlation and *t*-test independent samples. The sampling technique was convenience sampling of undergraduate students. The questionnaire included two instruments: the Shuttle Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS) as discussed by Jonker and Vosloo (2008) and the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) discussed by Smith et al, (2008). Results were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24.

Participants

A convenience sample of 100 undergraduate students attending a small faith-based private university in the southwest in Texas was used in the current study. The sample included 74 female and 26 males. The participants were between the ages of 18 to 24 and had an average age of 21. Concerning ethnicity, the participants consisted of 29 Caucasian, 29 African – Americans, 22 Hispanics, 17 Asian/ Pacific – Island, and 3 who self-identify as “other”. The average GPA was 3.4.

Measures

The demographic section of the questionnaire requested information about the participants’ age, gender, ethnicity, estimated GPA, academic year, and the parents’ education. Parental information was collected to determine if participants were first generation college student or non- first generation college students.

The Shuttle Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS) measures six factors, which are positive affect, emotion – others, happy emotions, emotions-own, non-verbal emotions and emotion management. The instrument is comprised of 33 items, three of which (5, 28 and 33) are reverse – scored and has a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.70 (Jonker & Vosloo, 2008). The SEIS requires the individual to rate the extent to which he or she agrees or disagrees with each statement on a five – point Likert scale going from 1, strongly disagree to 5, strongly agree. The scoring consists of the sum of the items.

According to Smith et al. (2008), the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) was designed to measure individual resilience and assess the ability to bounce back or recover from stress. The BRS is a rating scale with a Cronbach’s alpha ranging from 0.80 to 0.91. In support of convergent, validity, the questionnaire is positively correlated with other resilience measures including optimism, purpose of life, social support, active coping and positive reframing. The six items are divided so that 1, 3 and 5 positively formulated, and items 2, 4 and 6 are negatively. It is reversed scored on items 2, 4 and 6. The participants indicated the extent to which they agree with each of the statements. The responses were coded with 1, strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neutral, 4 agree, and 5 strongly agree. Responses were summed and divided by 6: A higher score indicates higher resilience.

Results

The results of the study indicated first generation college students had higher levels of resilience than non- first generation college students. These results are in contradiction to the

hypothesis stated in this study which was based on first generation college student outcomes of previous studies that indicated first generation college students are associated with a risk of attrition as a result of their family background and the changes in their family traditions being the first person earning college education (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

According to the University of North Carolina (UNC Office of Undergraduate Retention, 2014), first generation students are exposed to situations that may cause them stress. For example, pressure related to a sense of obligation to their families and others, exhibit depression and anxiety, financial stress and difficulty with peer relations. On the other hand, Avey et al. (2009) expressed resilient people are better prepared to deal with stresses in a constantly changing environment. The results obtained in the current study agree with this earlier finding of first generation college students had higher levels of resilience than non-first generation college students.

Previous research has found that first generation students are exposed to stressful situations and other factors that may help them be prepared to deal with the stressors during college life. First generation college students may develop resilience even before they enrolled in college. Therefore, first generation college students might be able to adapt to changes that college life requires. In addition, higher levels of resilience may not be related to adaptation to the changes and academic persistence, but also, a predictor of mental health. These results are important for success coaches, counselors, professors and other staff that work with first generation college students. The professionals and staff that work with first generation college students could use the results to support the students learning to overcome stressful situation, adaptation to changes and because how first generation students negotiate these conflicts may influence their success (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

According to Schneider et al. (2013), emotional intelligence is the ability and use of emotions to enhance thinking, including altering emotions, redirect cognitive process, obtain new perspective, and enhance problem-solving or creativity. Therefore, it is possible that first generation college students may present difficulties in managing emotions that may lead them to have difficulties during cognitive processes and problem solving, tools that they need to adaptation from high school to college life. These might be associated with previous studies, which presented that first generation college students are more likely to not finish a college degree compared with their peers. (UNC Office of Undergraduate Retention, 2014) It is important that professionals working with first generation college students provide guidance and implement support programs to improve their emotional intelligence and prevent the aspect that involve emotional intelligence being a reason of failure for their academic goals.

On the other hand, emotional intelligence is related to resilience because the emotional intelligence facilitates resilient stress responses including such as challenge appraisal. Although first generation college students may use resilience to deal with stressful situations, emotional intelligence is related to different factors different to the situations that needs resilience such as learning strategies, learning process by retaining new information, using cognitive, affective and psychological behaviors to interact and respond to learning environments (Dunn & Griggs 2000).

According to Fernandez et al. (2012) emotional intelligence has a significance implication in the academic success of college students; in consequence these levels of emotional intelligence may affect the academic performance. However, the current study showed the opposite results, since the difference between emotional intelligence and GPA was not significance in first generation college students. Therefore, emotional intelligence and resilience may not have a correlation to academic performance. Students may not associate their emotions

with their academic performance. Students also have to maintain higher GPAs and pass their classes for many reasons (scholarships programs, athletes policies, jobs, graduate programs and others) first generation college students may separate their grades from their stressful situations in order comply with policies and continue in the programs.

While the difference between the quantity of students were closer between sophomore and senior students, instead of freshman and seniors as the hypothesis assumed, any correlation was found between resilience or emotional intelligence in first generation students between academic years. According to the results, the study presumed that first generation college students may have the same resilience and emotional intelligence through the years, the stressful situations may confront with the same skills and tools maintaining the levels of resilience and emotional intelligence during the college stage.

Summary and Concluding Discussion

There is a higher resilience in first generation college students compared with non- first generation college student; therefore, for future research it important to study different psychological variable to determine the reason of the higher dropout of first generation college student from college. Further researcher may study aspects that are maintaining higher levels of drop out and lower levels of academic integration, according to Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998). In addition, in future researches the study should be performed by high school students to determine if the levels of resilience are developing since this time and cause by their family background coming from parents who do not have college experience. Another recommendation is that a future study should be conducted on a larger scale. The research should be performed in universities and community college with more quantities of students, in order, to have a wider range between first generation college student and non- first generation. Conducting the research in larger universities or community colleges will help the hypothesis that planned to compare the first generation college students' resilience and emotional intelligence between academic years, to include a larger quantity of students to compare. Last, the study may be more focused on gender differences and ethnicity.

In conclusion, the researcher found a significant difference between the levels of resilience between first generation college students and non- first generation college students. Therefore, there is a positive outcome towards the first generation college students' population, which showed their capacity to overcome stressful situations during college life and other factors. They may also have the capacity to adapt to changes as college life required of them. On the other hand, the first generation college students had lower levels of emotional intelligence that might be an important factor to help them manage their emotions allowing them to enhance their cognitive process and solving problems. Professionals as success coaches, professors, counselors and others need to consider this result to support first generation college students to obtain their academic success. Finally, another result that is important for counselors of first generation success coaches, professors and other staff is that there is not a relationship between GPA and levels of resilience and emotional intelligence in first generation college students. These results may be related to the capacity of separating their life with their academic performance, because of factors that obligate them to maintain higher levels of GPAs.

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