The Real Stressors of College Students: Factors Predictive of Academic Engagement

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Abstract

Stress is known to be a pressure many college students experience, likely impacting their success. However, little is known about the types of stressors experienced and how stress relates to academic engagement. The purpose of this study is to explore stressors students experienced during an average school week and how factors such as stress, morning outlook, and personal resources predicted studying behavior. Using Ecological Momentary Assessment, college students (N= 108) provided daily information about their stress experiences and studying routines. Students experience an average of two stressors a day, and the most reported stressors were school and time pressure. A positive relationship was found between stress and studying, and morning outlook was predictive of studying behavior. Results provide information applicable to student supports.

When examining students' relationship with stress, academics are automatically involved, particularly academic engagement —the dedication and commitment a student prescribes to their studies. Every student commonly has one objective, to learn and obtain knowledge. Mitchell et al. (2005) stated that students who are focused on education believe that their focus will propel their learning ability. No matter how dedicated and committed students may be, it is likely that stress may find its way into the equation. The stress of academics, new social climates, and living environments are always present (Leppink et al., 2016). There are also work, time, and money pressures that may cause students to lose focus and feel stressed. It is up to each student to use their resources to overcome stress and focus on their studies.

Student Stress

In 2019 alone, more than half of college students reported "overwhelming anxiety and tremendous stress." One year later, students' stress levels surged with the presence of the global pandemic (Hoyt et al., 2020). The understanding of student's experiences and relationship with stress was described by Krypel and Henderson-King (2010) as perceived stress, "a person's perceptions of the stress than by objectively measured stress in the situation" (p. 411). How a student experiences their stress and identifies with it is one of the main components for identifying the scenarios stemming from their stress.

It is helpful to understand why some individuals are more resilient to stress than others, particularly to advise students on effective stress management and academic engagement strategies. It was argued that optimism is a resource that may be utilized to combat the adverse effects of stress. Optimistic students are defined as students who have "positive expectations for the future" (Krypel & Henderson., 2010). Remaining optimistic in stressful situations as a student means there is almost always a presence of a positive outlook. Krypel and Henderson (2010) stated that Optimists are believed to experience fewer burnout symptoms and combat educational challenges encountered.

It is also helpful to understand why some individuals are more resilient to stress than others, particularly to advise students on effective stress management and academic engagement strategies. Initial findings shared by Maykrantz and Houghton (2020) examined self-leadership as "a process of self-influence through which individuals lead themselves" as a possible distinguishing factor for those who were successful in managing their stress and anxiety (p. 81). Amanvermez et al (2019) conducted a study to examine the effects of stress management interventions in reducing stress, depression, and anxiety among college students. The study participants were students with high stress/ anxiety levels, which were described as high levels of cortisol or high scores on stressful event evaluation and checklist. The results from the study indicated that stress management interventions might be effective in reducing distress among college students. Understanding sources of stress and the role of stress in academic engagement can help inform stress management interventions with greater precision.

Academic Engagement

In the 1980s, the projected time to complete a college degree was four years. Since the early 2000s, the same degree is projected to take six years (Moody et al., 2020). There have been many questions around why undergraduate degrees have become more time-consuming. One possible answer is student engagement. A student engagement study conducted by Mitchell and co- contributors' objective was to increase the quality of the courses offered at their university. They believed that a student's engagement might vary depending on the course, so two studies were developed to examine that theory. The first study theorized that "student engagement measure would be related to two types of self-reported engagement: (a) absolute engagement in their present course and (b) relative engagement, a judgment of how engaged students are in a particular course compared with how engaged they are in other courses. The second portion investigated the utility of the Student Course Engagement Questionnaire by testing it concerning grades. Mitchell et al (2005) hypothesized that more focused students would do better in class than those who were not. Both studies discovered four dimensions of college student engagement —skill engagement, participation/ interaction engagement, emotional engagement, and performance engagement.

Academic Psychological Capital

Some students have higher levels of psychological capital (PsyCap) which are the "positive psychological resources of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism" (Luthans et al., 2014, p. 191), simply a skill that may help a student better face adversity, such as stress. A person with higher psychological capital levels has a better chance of work-based positive outcomes (Luthans et al., 2016). Avey et al (2019) conducted a study that described PsyCap as a "positive strength" to combat career stressors (p. 680). Academic psychological capital is not only a construct that describes attributes that may have some advantages in certain situations. It

goes beyond what someone may know or whom they know but is more about who they are and the potential for greatness within that individual (Luthans et al, 2016).

There is reason to believe that PsyCap makes students more successful. The presence of positive psychological resources such as efficacy is a positive predictor of academic performance for a college student (Luthans et al., 2014, p. 193).

A study conducted by You (2013) discovered that PsyCap has a meaningful relationship with learning empowerment and academic engagement. His findings went on to imply "PsyCap promotes an individual's motivation for learning and ultimately enhances learning engagement" (You, 2013, p. 22)

While there is abundant research surrounding the validity of college students' stress, there seems to be a deficiency in literature in the type of stressors students are experiencing and how stress relates to academic engagement. This study will analyze the relationships among stress, academic engagement, morning outlook, and academic psychological capital. The following research questions will be addressed:

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between stress and academic engagement?
Research Question 2: What kind of stressors were reported by students, and with what frequency?
Research Question 3: What is the relationship between Stress, Morning Outlook, PsyCap, and Academic Engagement?

Method

Participants and Procedures

The data from the ENGAGE study was conducted by Dr. Allison Fleming and her co-investigators during the 2018- 2019 academic year. One hundred eight students were enrolled and registered as participants in the study. Females comprised 72.2% of the sample, and 26.9% were male. Fourteen students were first year, 25 were second year, 36 were third year, 30 were fourth year, and three were fifth or more. The data was collected using the Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA) method, asking questions in real-time and within respondents' natural environment allowing greater response accuracy.

Measures

Demographics: Participants were asked to disclose their gender, race/ ethnicity, age, and grade level.

Phone Ambulatory Assessment: The participants carried a lab-owned smartphone and were expected to respond to six surveys 7 days of the week. The questionnaire was divided into three sections wake up survey, Mid-day survey, and nighttime survey. The wake-up survey was expected to be completed upon waking up. The mid-day surveys were randomized with two-hour intervals. The final set of questions, the nighttime survey, was completed before bed after the last randomized mid-day survey.

The morning survey targeted uncovering data about forecasting, sleep, and cognition. The mid-day beeps target was feelings, cognition, time pressure/ distraction. Finally, the nighttime survey focused on feelings, cognition, time pressure/ distraction, behavior ratings, and stressors recap. Some sample questions asked in the survey were "How stressful do you expect today to be?", "What is your level of worry?" "Has anything stressful happened to you since the last beep?" and "How much did stress interfere with your schoolwork today?" The majority of the answers were provided using a scale ranging from *not at all* to *extremely*, and some questions prompted participants to specify their answer themselves or answer with a simple yes or no.

Results

The correlations between various variables were examined to approach the first research question, what is the relationship between stress and academic engagement? The data (Table 1) indicated that when students were more stressed, they tend to have a higher rate of studying when they have the opportunity (r=.218). There was also a positive correlation between stress and stress interference throughout the participant's day (.811*).

Table 1.

Correlations among Attended Class, Studied, Stress Now, and Stress Interference variables.

	M	sd	1	2	3	4
1. Attended Class			X			
2. Studied			.216*	X		
3. Stress Now			-.089	.284**	X	
4. Stress Interference			-.153	.127	.811**	X

*=p<.05
**=p<.01

The second question, "What kind of stressors were reported by students, and with what frequency?" was examined by looking closer at the responses from the behavior wrap up questions asked. During the night questionnaire, the students were asked about the stressors they experienced. Students could select all that applied, or "none." The participants reported a total of 593 stressors throughout the study. The participants experienced an average of two stressors a day (Table 2). In the order of School (56.3%), Time Pressure (43.8%), Personal Arguments (26%), Money (22.8%), Work/Romantic relationship (18.5%), Discrimination/ Other (2.7%), and Bullying (1.3%).

Table 2. *Frequency of Student Stressors*

	N	Mean *(sd)*
Personal Argument	154	.26 *(.439)*
Romantic	110	.19 (.389)
School	334	.56 (.496)
Work	110	.19(.389)
Money	135	.23(.420)
time	260	.44(.497)
Discrimination	16	.03(.162)
Bully	8	.01(.115)

Other	97	.16(.370)
Total	593	2.07(1.634)

To address the third question, what is the relationship between stress, morning outlook, PsyCap, and academic engagement? - a closer look was taken at variables stress now, academic PsyCap, and forecast optimism. It was discovered that Stress and Morning Outlook both predicted studying, but Academic PsyCap did not. Academic PsyCap was found to only have a correlation to the total study quality variable, which was readiness to study, organization for studying, and remaining up to date with studying.

Table 3. *Regression among Variables*

Predictor	B(SE)	p-value
Stress Now	.315(.005)	.001
Academic PsyCap	.000(.000)	.996
Forecast Optimism	.255(.005)	.012

    a. *Dependent Variable: studied mean (Adjusted R= .118)*

Discussion

To sum up the findings, stress was positively related to academic engagement, as operationalized as studying. This finding makes sense within the context of the types of stressors reported. The most common stressors were school and time, indicating that students' most significant stressors were school-related. The way to address this kind of stress is to engage academically, as these behaviors (studying, attending class) will make success more likely. The predictors of studying behavior also included optimism but did not include academic PsyCap.

      The study results indicated that how a person approaches their day could serve as a precursor for how that day goes. The students who answered positively to the question "today is going to be a good day" were more likely to have a good day, simply the self-influence instilled by students may have the potential to control many other factors. Luthans et al (2014) defined optimism as an expectation of future success. Students with a positive outlook are more motivated to achieve goals at a higher rate. Our findings also indicated that stress is a potential motivator, as stress was positively related to studying behavior. The main stressors discovered, school and time pressures, were both related to school. Even though stress is seen as having a positive relationship with academic engagement in this study, moderation is also vital to help students have a healthy balance. Chiauzzi and colleagues (2008) developed an intervention named MyStudentBody—Stress to boost stress management skills and healthy behaviors for U.S. college students. MyStudentBody—Stress was a website that prompted students to answer a five-question questionnaire about their stress levels. After submitting responses, the student would receive a report that featured positive affirmations, among other things. Chiauzzi et al (2008) observed that their intervention could decrease anxiety levels and increase the use of specific stress management skills. Interventions such as Chiauzzi et al could be the answer to healthy intervention to help moderate the levels of stress college students experience.

There were some limitations encounter during this study. First, this study was a secondary data analysis, meaning that questions were constrained to the information available. The data collected was self-reported, and we are assuming that students reported their activities and feelings accurately and honestly. A third limitation was the collection of our data. The observations were limited to one week. We assumed that we were catching a typical week, but there is a chance that participants provided data during an abnormal week that was not representative of their normal habits.

Implications for Student Support

The study provides additional understanding of student experiences with stress in a daily context. Understanding that stress is a potential motivator offers an opportunity for University's administration and faculty to approach the topic differently. A perspective that makes moderation their focal point. The Pew Research Center stated that the purpose of a student is to "grow personally and intellectually" (Heimlich, 2011). Many forget that there is more to a student than being a student. There is a personal aspect to their lives, which should not be forgotten to pursue a degree.

There is space and opportunity for interventions such as MyStudentBody that helps record and assess stress levels so students and faculty can realize and intercept themselves whenever their levels may seem too high. Aside from the top two stressors being school and time pressures, other stressors demand just as much attention, such as personal arguments, money, and work. Policies that focus on supporting students outside lives stressors could effectively balance the level of stress students experience every day. Something as simple as introducing daily mindfulness routines could be a great introduction to the new approach.

Many institutions have programs that focus on the well-being of a student's mental health. The problem is that many students have no knowledge of their resources, especially following a year impacted by COVID-19, where much of the on-campus presence and experience was altered or missing. There can be much more done to make students aware of what their schools have to offer. Even though universities may have such resources, there is always space for improvement. The students' voices are essential and should be listened to because the resources offered are outdated and may need updating. In conclusion, conversations between administrations and the communities they serve maybe the key to may forward more positively.

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