

***Stress Among College Students:
How Social Capital, Locus of Control, and Isolation Shape College Students' Well-being***

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Abstract

University life represents one of the most thrilling chapters in one's personal and professional life but also introduces a host of difficulties with the potential to intensify stress. When unattended, stress can worsen and impede academic accomplishments, emotional health, and social well-being. *Objectives:* This study aims to explore the relationships among stress, feelings of isolation, social capital, and locus of control among students at a midwestern U.S. university. *Methods:* We used an online survey method for data collection, using Qualtrics software. The survey was distributed through the deans in several schools/colleges, yielding 433 responses. Results were analyzed with descriptive statistics and regression analysis. *Results:* In addition to having higher social capital in general, undergraduate students indicated higher routine contact with their social network and a greater ability to rely on their social network for help than graduate students. Undergraduate students also indicated having a higher internal locus of control than graduate students. Finally, female students indicated higher levels of stress but a higher reliability on their social network than male students. *Conclusions:* The implications of this study are relevant for stakeholders at universities that are responsible for student care, services, and engagement. We recommend further qualitative study on the context of stress and replicating the survey at other universities and with faculty and staff.

Keywords: College Students, Stress, Social Capital, Locus of Control, Isolation, Online Survey

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Introduction

University life represents one of the most thrilling and enduring chapters in a young adult's journey. Nevertheless, it also introduces them to a host of hurdles and difficulties. These challenges illuminate the essence of a stimulating and ever-evolving college experience. Consequently, they have the potential to intensify stress, which, when unattended, can worsen and impede their academic accomplishments, emotional health, and social harmony.

Statistics reveal a disconcerting reality: students experience genuine stress, which, in certain instances, may be comparable to the stress faced by adults. The academic and psychological demands of education often grow in tandem with a student's progression (Reddy et al., 2018). Moreover, external influences such as family dynamics, financial pressures, social relationships, and mental health can either serve as sources of support or further distractions from academic pursuits (Lian, 2018). According to findings from a 2019 ACHA-National College Health Assessment II national research survey, the majority of students cited stress and anxiety as the primary factors negatively impacting their academic performance (ACHA, 2019).

Social support provided by the university, family, friends, and mentors has a significant impact on a student's academic performance and achievement. Similarly, emotional, academic, and financial assistance play crucial roles in determining the success of college students. The college experience can be demanding and can reshape a student's life. Therefore, it is essential to have the presence and support of family and friends while navigating through college (Trochel et al., 2000). Additionally, Shaikh et al. (2004) highlight that issues related to relationships, both within the family and at college, often contribute to stress among students. According to Greenberg (1996), the process of making new friends is a factor that can induce stress in college students. Furthermore, it is commonly observed that forming and cultivating new friendships can be a stressful aspect closely associated with college life.

Research conducted by Dennis et al. (2005) and Nicpon et al. (2006) unequivocally establishes that students with limited social engagement are inclined to experience greater isolation, achieve lower grades, and face a heightened risk of dropping out of college. Academic performance and overall adjustment tend to decline for students who grapple with loneliness and social inactivity during their college years, preventing them from tapping into the available social support and resources on campus.

This study explored how isolation and social capital impacted stress levels among college students. Isolation or feeling disconnected from society can increase stress. At the same time, social capital, including support and networks from relationships, may also contribute to student stress but may also have a protective effect against stress. The study aims to investigate the degree of isolation experienced by students, the extent of their social capital, support systems and resources. This study investigates the correlation among isolation and social network, and stress.

Methods

Data Collection

This research used quantitative survey methods with a Qualtrics online survey to better understand the relationships among major factors. The aim is to find out whether more isolation leads to higher stress levels, and how having a strong social support affects stress. After receiving an approval from the University's Institutional Review Board, an online survey link was disseminated to both graduate and undergraduate students at a mid-sized private university in the Midwest in the United States via forwarded message from each college/school.

Variables

All variables were measured by 5-point Likert scales, and means of each composite scale were created, making the range of all the variables five.

Stress was measured in different domains: environmental, personal, and educational (Garbee et al., 1980; Harris et al., 2017) with a reliability of 0.821. Locus of Control (Berrenberg, 1987) was separated into internal and external locus of control for a data analysis. The reliabilities were 0.709 (external) and 0.589 (internal). Social Capital was created from existing scales (Wang et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2015) with a reliability of 0.870. Isolation (Russell, 1996) yielded a reliability of 0.800.

Results

Sample Characteristics

In the total sample size of 433, 70.3% were female students, and 61.3% were undergraduate students. Further, 60.3% of the sample were employed either part-time or full-time.

Results of Regression Analysis

The study found that undergraduate students, in comparison to graduate students, showed higher social capital, more routine contact with their social network, higher ability to reply on their social network, and higher internal locus of control (all p-values were <0.05). While female students indicated more stress than male students, they showed higher reliability on their social network for help (p<0.05).

As expected, those with higher social capital showed less stress, those who scored higher in isolation showed higher stress, and primary family caretakers showed higher stress than those who did not have family obligations. Further, those who had high external locus were more likely to show high level of stress.

Conclusions

The survey was carried out after the fall break, thus students' stress level might have been lower than at other times during the semester. The small sample size may be due to a lack of follow-up e-mail. Nevertheless, the study found that isolation, social capital, and locus of control impacted stress among university students and that the graduate students reported

greater isolation and less social capital than undergraduate students. The latter finding is valuable because there is a void in the literature regarding graduate students' stress and social support.

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