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Adjustment Issues in First-year College Students

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Honors Project: Literature Review
First-year College Adjustment

Abstract

The transition from high school to college marks a critical period of adjustment for students, often accompanied by various stressors affecting mental health. Entering adulthood can be a time of identity crisis and emotional vulnerability, and beginning college only adds to existing pressure. This literature review explores multifaceted aspects of first-year college student adjustment, the impact of COVID-19 on universities, predictors of adjustment, and interventions. Emotional, social, and academic adjustment are intertwined with each other, and all significantly influence well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated challenges, leading to heightened stress and decreased social interactions. Establishing connections and support from peers are crucial for social adjustment and decreased loneliness. Not only did depression and anxiety rates increase during the pandemic, but studies are showing a continuing increase in mental health issues and adjustment problems post-pandemic. Factors promoting positive adjustment include sleep, exercise, limited social media use, and parental support. Interventions like mental health screenings and campus support services can facilitate smoother transitions to college life and manage the mental distress of students. Despite certain limitations such as convenience sample or self-report bias along with research gaps regarding intersectionality, the research supports that understanding the complexities of adjustment and implementing proactive strategies are vital for promoting student well-being in higher education.
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Introduction

It is widely recognized that college students are vulnerable to stress in many forms. The drastic life transition that occurs when students graduate high school and begin college marks a period of adjustment that can bring many mental health concerns. Living situation, financial stability, social life, academic pressure, lifestyle, and more are significantly altered when students make this transition (Beiter et al., 2014). According to the National Survey of College Counseling Centers, severe psychological problems among students have been progressively increasing as about one-third of students suffer from emotional disorders (Sarmento, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic had a tremendous impact on the daily life of college students as all classrooms were switched to a virtual format and social isolation was mandatory for several months. There is no doubt that students suffered from worsened mental health for the duration of the pandemic (Chaturvedi et al., 2021). However, now that the major effects of the pandemic have lessened over the last couple of years, researchers have been examining the post-pandemic psychological effects that remain. This literature review will address the different aspects of student adjustment to college during the first year, the impact of COVID-19 on university environments, predictors of adjustment, and interventions to reduce the prevalence of these issues.

Academic Adjustment

Academic adjustment, which can be defined as the ability to cope with the academic demands of the university environment, is crucial for student success in college. Class schedules and workload in universities differ greatly from those in high school, and many other life factors can impact how well students are able to succeed academically. Research has found that 20 to 30% of college students experience adjustment difficulties, and it is consistently shown that
academic adjustment is a major predictor in achievement (Lowe & Cook, 2003). Since adjustment problems can affect dropout rates and academic performance, it is important to examine the possible causes of these issues to hopefully aid more students in their success. In 2017, a sample of 243 first-year university students in the Netherlands completed a questionnaire 3 months into the school year. The study measured different aspects of student success outcomes such as grade point average, number of credits, and intention to persist in relation to motivational factors. The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) by Baker and Siryk was used to determine levels of academic adjustment. The findings of the study concluded that intrinsic motivation, self-regulatory study behavior, and degree program satisfaction were the greatest predictors of positive academic adjustment. This positive adjustment was substantially linked to higher GPA and more attained credits (van Rooij et al., 2017). The results confirmed that academic adjustment can measure the success of the student transition from secondary school to higher education. Some limitations of the study were that it was a convenience sample, women were overrepresented, and it was email questionnaire that not everyone responded to. This could lead to biased results that do not reflect the majority of the population, and therefore cannot be used to make generalizations.

**Social Adjustment**

Social experiences play a key role in well-being in general, but especially for first-year college students who are entering an entirely new environment in which they might not know many people. The social adjustment process can greatly impact the success of transitioning to higher education. Prior research provides evidence that social adjustment is related to well-being, motivation, and academic success. Willems et al. (2022) examined what first-year university students consider to be important social experiences in terms of their adjustment process. In
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November 2017, 3225 Dutch students completed questionnaires measuring aspects of student adjustment such as self-efficacy, self-concept, emotion regulation, and social and academic adjustment. They were separated into two groups based on the results; the low group consisted of those who reported low levels of adjustment and the high group consisted of those who reported particularly high adjustment levels. These two groups then participated in the next phase of research to complete a reflective log starting in their second semester in which they reflected on their first semester experiences. The log required students to describe three important experiences, positive or negative, in relation to their social adjustment and provide a timeline. The critical incidents technique (CIT) was utilized which is defined as, “a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles,” (Willems et al., 2022). After analyzing the logs, five main themes of the social experiences involved in the adjustment process were revealed when making distinctions between the two groups. These themes are dealing with the unknown, establishing a first connection, establishing a deeper connection, support from peers and others, and loneliness. Entering college comes with a variety of new experiences that are unknown to the student. In a lot of cases, they are living away from home for the first time and are trying to establish a social group in a pool of people that they have just met. When students experience successful social integration, they can establish initial connections and then make those connections deeper, resulting in peer support. These connections and the sense of belonging that comes with them are key aspects of psychological well-being and are major predictors of a positive adjustment to college. When the social transition of establishing relationships is more difficult than the student would like, this can result in feelings of loneliness. Every human has an innate desire to connect with others, and
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when this desire is not being met, mental health and well-being can be significantly hindered.

The findings of this study line up with previous research, which has stated that social connection, satisfaction with friendships, and feeling academically successful were the factors most strongly related to sense of belonging and well-being (Bowman et al., 2018).

Those with social anxiety are at a greater risk of social and emotional problems at the start of college such as stress and depression. Social anxiety can trigger avoidance and distress which negatively correlate with all types of adjustment according to Arjanggi and Kusumaningsih (2016), who claim that adjustment to college includes four dimensions consisting of academic, social, emotional, and institutional aspects. This means that the lower the level of social avoidance, the better students are able to adjust to university in all aspects (Arjanggi & Kusumaningsih, 2016).

**Emotional Adjustment**

Emotional, academic, and social adjustment are all interrelated, as each component has an impact on the others. Being able to succeed academically and socially engage with others depends, to a certain extent, on emotional well-being. Hedonic well-being can be defined as, “a broad concept that includes experiencing pleasant emotions, low levels of negative moods, and high life satisfaction,” (Diener, 2009). On the other hand, eudaimonic well-being emphasizes the actualization of human potentials. Through self-fulfillment and prioritizing long-term goals, purpose in life can be found and eudaimonic well-being is achieved (Bowman et al., 2018). A study from several fall semesters starting in 2009 and ending in 2015 obtained and analyzed weekly survey responses from 882 first-year students at a Midwest university. Well-being was measured by asking students to identify how many times in the past week they had experienced certain positive or negative emotions (i.e., high self-esteem, life satisfaction, anxiety, loneliness,
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etc.). They were also asked about variables such as skipped classes, sleep time, study time, exercise time, extracurricular involvement, etc. to determine how much these correlate with positive or negative well-being. The results showed that social relationships, academic success and competence, time spent exercising, and minimal time spent on social media were the main factors promoting positive well-being (Bowman et al., 2018). Like all studies, there are a few limitations to be discussed. The results came from only one course at one university, so the data might not be generalizable to the overall population of college students. Also, the findings only represent the first semester of college and do not investigate how these results might change throughout the year.

Another survey given to a sample of 374 undergraduate students at a university in Ohio used the DASS 21 scale to have participants rate their levels of depression, anxiety, and stress while rating daily sources of concern (i.e., academics, family, sleep, etc). All the sources of concern were significantly positively correlated with depression, anxiety, and stress. However, when investigating the demographics of the participants, it was found that upperclassmen were mentally struggling more than underclassmen. Other research has found the opposite, stating that a study of university students in Turkey reported highest levels of stress in freshman and sophomores (Beiter et al., 2014). This shows that there might be gaps in the research that could be causing these discrepancies. For example, overreliance on self-report measures, lack of diversity in samples, or confounding variables are possible factors that could affect the results of studies.

COVID-19 Impact

There is no denying that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted university environments and student lifestyles in monumental ways, and some research is showing that psychological
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effects are still lingering even years later. As discussed with the several aspects of student adjustment, there are many lifestyle changes and factors that can affect a student's well-being and ability to adjust to their new way of life. Those who were already in college experienced a dramatic shift in the set-up of their education with the introduction of virtual classrooms, school closures, travel restrictions, and social isolation measures. The major change to daily life can lead to, “interpersonal dysfunction and feelings of loneliness, helplessness, and depression,” (Zhang, 2022). With constant uncertainty and frequently changing norms on college campuses since 2020, there has been a significant increase in reports of mental health concerns in students both during and after the pandemic. Research has found that about ¼ of college students experience anxiety and about 1/5 experience depression. “Stress and anxiety are the main factors affecting the mental health of college students,” (Zhang, 2022). One study in Bangladesh investigating the psychological impact of the pandemic found that 44.6% of students were suffering from severe anxiety, 48.4% from moderate anxiety, and 3.8% from mild anxiety. Worrying about the pandemic’s influence on the economy and on daily life were positively correlated with these levels of anxiety (Dhar et al., 2020).

Those who entered college after the height of the pandemic are still dealing with the remnants of the changes to universities, and research is showing that social adjustment has been significantly hampered. Ni and Jia (2023) identified problematic behaviors before, during, and after the pandemic and analyzed post-pandemic social anxiety in adolescents. Reportedly nearly 10% of adolescents in the United States have social anxiety disorder that worsened through the months of isolation during which they developed reclusive habits and social withdrawal symptoms. As people started to socialize more coming out of quarantine, a higher rate of social anxiety was found compared to before the pandemic. Almost 49% claimed to feel anxious
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returning to normal social interactions (Ni & Jia, 2023). Although online interactions may seem easier or less anxiety-inducing because they are more accessible and one can essentially “hide behind the screen,” in-person social interactions are vital for sense of belonging and well-being. Despite returning to “normal,” some people continued avoiding interactions that they wouldn’t have before because they became accustomed to minimal socializing. During the lockdown, people were able to escape into the virtual world and social media addiction increased due to the temporary dopamine release it provides. Being too immersed in technology can deprive people of the value of social interactions, affecting both physical and mental health. A study of online questionnaires conducted at the University of California starting on April 28th, 2020, regarding virtual social interaction and loneliness in emerging adults during the pandemic revealed that, “more than one-third of adolescents reported a high level of loneliness, accordingly correlated with symptoms of depression and social anxiety disorders,” (Towner et al., 2022). The questionnaire measured virtual social interaction, in-person social isolation, loneliness, depression, happiness, and friendship. This study along with other research examining the pandemic’s impact has found overwhelming evidence suggesting large increases in depression, anxiety, and loneliness as well as a decrease in happiness and social needs being met. Face-to-face interactions in normal school settings before Covid-19 encouraged students to engage with each other and cultivate social skills, which may not be possible in a virtual classroom setting (Chaturvedi et al., 2021).

The first year of college is already a challenging transition for many students, but the pandemic and the major life changes that came with it caused the prevalence of mental health issues to increase. Forming social connections has become more difficult than in the past, resulting in decreased well-being, poorer adjustment, and increased loneliness.
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**Positive and Negative Predictors of Adjustment**

There are many factors that play a role in determining a positive or negative adjustment process such as internet use, sleep, exercise, diet, lifestyle habits, and more. A survey in July 2020 (Chaturvedi et al., 2021) consisting of 1182 participants from different schools in the Delhi-National Capital Region found that sleeping habits, daily fitness routines, lack of outdoor activity, and social distancing have had significant impacts on the health and mental well-being of students. Whether being used in the context of COVID-19 or not, these are all aspects of life that are important for overall health, happiness, and proper adjustment. Additional research aligns with the notion that sleeping problems and life changes regarding eating and social activities were related with negative emotional well-being (Bowman et al., 2018).

Coping styles and strategies can be predictors of how well a student can adapt to new life situations, such as beginning college, and learning how to identify and promote positive behaviors can be an effective way to help those having a difficult time. Positive coping styles take active and effective measures to reduce stress and are associated with improved school adaptation, good mental health, and high self-esteem. Negative coping styles consist of neglecting problems with the presence of negative emotions or self-blaming attitudes. Becoming dependent on mobile phones and avoiding social interactions with peers are ways to ignore real-life issues and leads to negative or passive attitudes, anxiety, depression, hindered learning, and poor adaptation (Wang et al., 2023).

Extensive time spent on social media (i.e., over 4 hours daily) is linked to worsened sense of belonging and well-being when compared to minimal usage. Along with limiting social media, living on campus has been shown to enhance social involvement leading to better adjustment and retention. Exercising and relationship satisfaction with parents are two other factors that were
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correlated with beneficial outcomes for students in their adjustment period (Bowman et al., 2018). The physical and mental health benefits that come with exercising can improve mood and overall satisfaction in general, not just in college, and parental support during this time provides guidance and care to ease the student into the transition.

Interventions and Recommendations

Due to the prevalence of mental health issues and stress among college freshman, it is essential to provide support and interventions to address these difficulties and promote greater student well-being. Counseling services on college campuses are a valuable resource, but students with social anxiety might feel apprehensive to seek help. Unfortunately, about 50% of students who experience suicidal thoughts never seek treatment. Regular mental health screenings on campus, specifically at times of increased stress (e.g., beginning of the semester, finals week, etc.) could help determine which students would benefit from services that they are not yet receiving. For example, the CCAPS-62, “a 62-item self-report measure of psychological distress specifically tailored for use in college and university counseling centers,” could be provided during course evaluations to get a better understanding of how students are doing mentally (Nordberg & McAleavey, 2013). If maladaptive behaviors can be identified in advance, proactive coping strategies and addressing underlying issues can prevent them from reaching levels of extreme distress.

Furthermore, there should also be proactive strategies implemented to allow an easier adjustment process to college for freshman in general, not just those who are severely struggling with their mental health. Things such as orientation programs, peer mentoring, academic support services, on-campus extracurriculars, and regular advising check-ins can make for a smoother transition. Traditional orientation programs were catered towards academic interests such as
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providing campus tours, advising information, registration, etc. while newer programs are
including more social aspects that aid students in their social adjustment to university (Newman-
Gonchar, 2000). Extracurriculars can help students maintain their social experiences throughout
the semester, and regular check-ins with advisors can deal with potential problems a student may
run into regarding academics or living situations.

It can be argued that college freshman might not speak truthfully to an advisor or
counselor during mandatory check-ins or evaluations. While it is a valid argument that students
can be apprehensive to share their thoughts unless they take the initiative to seek out help, there
is no way to completely eliminate or prevent these issues. The intent of the interventions is to
ensure that students who want help are aware that it is available and accessible to them. The
psychological pressure of college that freshman face cannot be totally avoided, but the goal is to
reduce the overall amount of stress and the prevalence of students reporting negative adjustment.

Discussion

Much of the research used in this literature review contains limitations and other factors
that make the data challenging to generalize. Self-report measures such as surveys or logs and
convenience samples both involve the risk of biases. Additionally, experiences vary greatly
across different races, genders, and socio-economic statuses that might affect overall adjustment,
and many of these studies do not explore intersectionality.

Strengths of the research involve the in-depth focus on different key factors involved in
adjustment and well-being (i.e. varying lifestyle habits), which provides insight to correlations
among variables and predictors of positive or negative adjustment. Studies can be found from
several different countries such as the Netherlands, India, the United States, Bangladesh etc.
First-year College Adjustment which indicates that these are common struggles that students face across different cultures and circumstances. Despite varying methods and demographics, the collective data overall supports that there is an increasing mental health crisis among college students, specifically during the first year and post-pandemic, so interventions are needed.

**Conclusion**

Transitioning to college is a major lifestyle change that can bring about adjustment issues in academic, social, and emotional aspects. College freshman are typically emerging adults that are experiencing drastic changes to their environment and are particularly vulnerable to stress, anxiety, and depression. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a tremendous impact on universities and the lifestyles of students. Schools closed and classrooms became entirely virtual for several months, and social distancing, restrictions, and online learning remained even once students were able to return. The stress and social isolation that resulted from the pandemic caused lasting effects on the psychological well-being of college students and has made the already challenging transition to college even more difficult. Post-pandemic social anxiety, depression, and academic pressures have heightened mental health issues on college campuses. Regular mental health screening and accessible counseling services on campuses can be helpful interventions to provide students with the support they need and prevent their level of distress from worsening.
References


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