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Positive Stress for Success

Introduction

Throughout a student's academic career, their own passions and interests shape their decision in choosing a major or area of study to focus on in higher education and in their future careers. However, external stress factors (e.g. parents, teachers, and society) and internal stress factors (e.g. goals, expectations, and ideas of self) may influence and even change a student's academic pursuits. Students go through stress factors in their academics, such as physical and mental tensions, confusion for their future, and the desire to succeed, and they can face more pressure when their own goals and other people's projections and expectations are placed on them. Stress is most commonly seen as a negative concept, where unhealthy levels of stress can seriously impede a person's well-being and happiness. However, these same factors can result in positive stress that can motivate students to pursue their goals, work hard on their academics, and help them focus on their education. For undergraduate students, academic work can highlight the high levels of stress they are going through due to grade pressures and test anxiety that can interfere with concentration and performance. However, positive stress can motivate students to reach their peak performance (Pfeiffer 6-7). This study will identify the possible stress factors college students experience and examine how different types of stress can be positive or negative through their response to challenges and how they achieve their goals.

Research Questions

1. How do internal stress factors (e.g. goals, expectations, and ideas of self) affect college students in their academic pursuits?
2. How do external stress factors (e.g. parents, teachers, and society) affect college students in their academic pursuits?

Literature Review

The main focus of many studies is the negative aspects of stress in college students that are caused by the transitional stage from high school to college and the desire to succeed academically. Additionally, there is an interest in how students develop strategies, adjust, and develop their mindsets and attitudes to respond to stress. In a prior study that took into consideration the transitional period from adolescence to adulthood, greater adjustment beliefs were positively correlated with positive feelings, such as hope, lower perceived stress in later semesters, and predicted better perceived academic performance (Parker, et al). Adjustment beliefs can be associated with internal stress factors that affect a person's motivation to adjust to a new academic and personal environment. This type of perceived stress can be seen more in freshmen and transfer students who first enter a college environment. Furthermore, another study identifies stressors, such as adjustments to college life, the pressure of studies that place a strain on interpersonal relationships, housing arrangements, and change in lifestyle, that can be mediated by developing coping strategies. When effective, these strategies can decrease feelings of anxiety and stress that will help students have a higher chance to succeed academically (Murff; Dziegielewski et al.). A student's personal life can greatly affect their mental and physical health which in turn can affect their academics. These studies mainly focus on the transitional period a student faces that causes them stress that later affects their academic pursuits

and success. However, each student may have a different circumstance that causes them stress outside this time of adjustment.

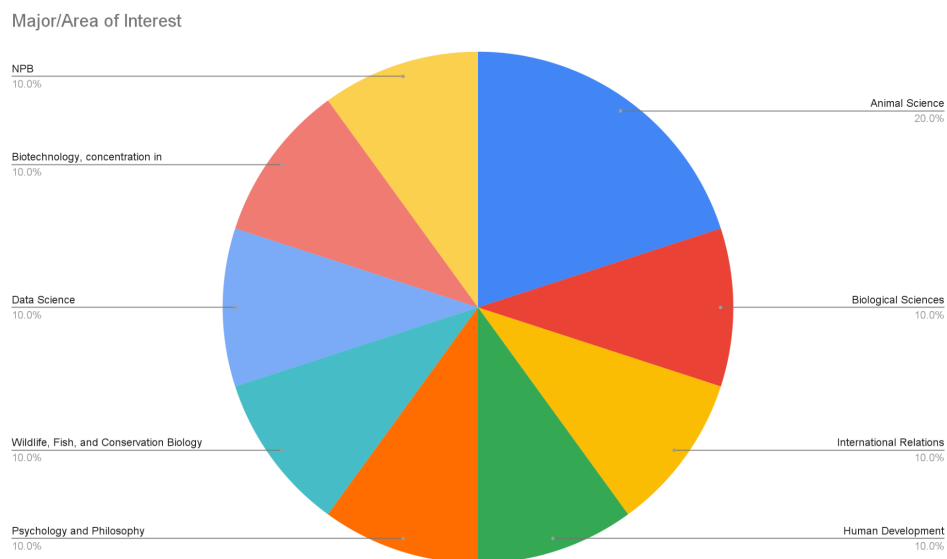
Another study identifies that a coping skill people can develop is to change their perception of stress which can affect their response to stress psychologically and behaviorally and can determine their performance (Crum et al.). By perceiving stress as a factor that can help in motivation and overcoming obstacles, people's stress response will differ from others who believe stress is an inhibiting factor. This change in mindset can greatly help students realize the severity of the situations that their minds may have inflicted on them or that others have pressured them into and make stress more manageable and approachable. In relation to mindset, academic achievement and motivation are culturally variable and through a person's culture, a person's mindset can predict their achievement motivation through their locus of control, academic stress, and life satisfaction (Karaman and Watson). Cultural beliefs and values influence a person's perspective of academic success and can be a source of external stress that over time has grown internally in a person's desire to adhere to a cultural norm or expectation. Overall, there are various stress factors that can influence a person's academic pursuits and performance, and each person's response to such factors can differ. My study sought to expand knowledge about stress through primary research about the various internal and external stress factors college students experience in their academic journey.

Methods

I developed and conducted a survey to gain different perspectives from various college students on their opinions and ideas of how they perceive and act upon stress. A survey is the best methodology for my study because it allows me to gather the unique opinions and ideas of

multiple college students on the topic of positive stress. A total of ten undergraduate students from UC Davis responded to my survey with the majority of them being from my UWP 1 class. In addition, over half of my participants are second year students with majors concentrated in the STEM field.

Pie Chart for Different Majors of Participants



I collected my data over the span of two weeks in the middle of February 2023. There were a total of thirteen questions that were divided into three demographic questions, seven Likert-scale questions, and two open-ended questions. The statistics of the proportions of demographic questions were used to learn about my sample of participants to see if their answers were relevant to my study. Likert-scale questions were given as statements where participants responded to each one on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). These questions evaluated each student's perception of where they received the most stress and how it affected them in their academic journey. For the Likert-scale questions, I provided descriptive statistics such as averages, standard deviations, and skews in the data to interpret whether each participant

answered in favor or not of each statement. Charts, such as pie charts and tables, will also be used to present my data in a clear, straightforward format. Open-ended questions were used to learn about each participants' perspectives on how stress impacts their academic lives. A thematic analysis will be used to analyze open-ended questions to find a pattern in responses that may suggest a common message between each participant that will allow me to find a correlation between how stress can be positive in the motivation of students to accomplish and achieve their goals and dreams.

Results

Many college students experience a lot of stress while pursuing their passions or interests. The means of their ratings for Likert-scale questions about internal stress factors being the biggest factor that motivated and affected their academic performance, the pursuit of a passion, and the choosing of their majors all leaned towards agreeing to the statements. For Likert-scale questions about external stress factors, most answers for pursuing a passion and choosing a major leaned toward disagreeing, except for the question "An external stress factor pushes me to do well in my academics." For that specific question, an average of 3.4 shows that there was a slight increase in participants agreeing that an external stress factor influences their academics.

Table 1 for the Mean and Standard Deviation of Likert-Scale Questions

Likert-Scale Statements	Mean Score for Likert-Scale (1 - strongly disagree to 5 - strongly agree)	Standard Deviation
I experience a lot of stress (tension, anxiety,	4.10	0.316

confusion, pressure, strain) while pursuing my passions or interests.		
I just chose a random major despite being confused about what I want to pursue in life.	2.30	1.567
An external factor (parents, teachers, and society) influenced me to choose my major.	2.70	1.059
An internal factor (goals, expectations, and ideas of self) influenced me to choose my major.	3.60	1.350
I chose my major based on my own interests and passions.	4.00	1.155
An external stress factor pushes me to do well in my academic pursuits.	3.40	0.516
I put the most pressure on myself to succeed in my academic pursuits.	3.90	0.876

For my open-ended questions, a few common themes were found in the data I collected. In my first question about defining stress in academics, the themes of stress from internal factors, stress from external factors, and fear and anxiety for the future were found. Stress from internal factors was seen in 56% of participants, stress from external factors at 33%, and fear and anxiety for the future at 44%.

Table 2 for Open-Ended Question: How do you define stress in your academic pursuits?

Theme Found in Data	Percent of Participants
Stress from internal factors (fear of failure, self expectations, desire/need to succeed)	56%
Stress from external factors (coursework deadlines, parents' expectations, societal stereotypes)	33%
Fear and anxiety for the future	44%

The second open-ended question about the positive or negative effects of stress on academic pursuits had 56% of participants saying that stress is a positive factor that helps them focus and motivate themselves, 78% saying that stress is a negative factor that burdens them by being physiologically draining, and 89% saying that internal stress is the most common source of stress.

Table 3 for Open-Ended Question: How does stress (internal and external) positively or negatively affect you to pursue your academic pursuits?

Theme Found in Data	Percent of Participants
Positive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Push, motivate, and focus completion of assignments and to study 	56%
Negative:	78%

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limiting by becoming a burden, physiologically draining, and affecting health 	
Internal stress is the most common factor in the pursuit of academic success.	89%

Altogether, the data suggest a correlation between internal stress factors and the effect it has on the widest range of participants in a negative way.

Discussion

From the Likert-scale questions and open-ended questions, the most evident stress factors experienced by college students are internal stress factors. These internal stress factors largely stem from fear and anxiety for their future that causes them to associate stress with more negative aspects than positive. The finding that many college students have a fear of the future builds upon the results Pfeiffer finds where undergraduate students have a fear of falling short of their own expectations in academics that could pose a threat to their academic or career prospects and cause their self esteem to suffer (Pfeiffer; Schafer 7). This relates to my research question that internal stress factors can be seen both positively and negatively. The fear of the future can stem from internal expectations of themselves of what they want to achieve and what they have internalized from society's expectations of success. That fear, in controlled amounts, in turn can push students to aim for success in their academics and their pursuit in internships and opportunities to boost their resumes and skills. In addition, "unpredictable learning environments, increased competition, social and financial pressures" (Perry et al.; Haynes et al.; Parker et al.) are external factors that can impact students in a more detrimental way that can

cause additional stress to their academics. When a person overcomes these additional stress factors, they can learn and grow from them. Here positive stress can motivate them and give them the resilience to persist through arduous circumstances. There are limitations in my study since I only surveyed 1st and 2nd years who are still adjusting to life at college and are still exploring various career paths. These limitations add variables to the stress factors that college students face in this transitional, developmental period that may influence secondary control, which is the adjustment and acceptance of a person's situation (Parker et al.). Moreover, I only surveyed students that are in my UWP 1 class where many students do not need to take this class to graduate. Following the limitations of my study, the next steps to answer my research questions include surveying a wider range of students in varying years, including transfer students and international students, and conducting another study on how the mindset of a student affects their perception of their internal and external stress factors. Additionally, I can include a survey of cultural values that influence a person's stress levels in their desire to meet cultural expectations.

Conclusion

Overall, the purpose of this study is to learn about the internal and external stress factors that affect college students in their academic pursuits. The data from my study shows a trend towards a higher acknowledgement of internal stress; however, there may be several external factors that could affect college students' academic pursuits. The internal stress factors seen most commonly in this group of participants are the fear of failure, expectations of oneself, and the desire/need to succeed that fuels the fear and anxiety for the future. On the other hand, external factors that affected participants the most were coursework deadlines, parental expectations, and

societal stereotypes. Additionally, most participants still maintained a negative view of the concept of stress, but over half of them recognized the positive aspects of stress that help them focus and motivate them to achieve their goals. My study did answer my research questions, although there are several aspects of my study I could improve upon to generalize this study to a general population of undergraduate students. The results of my study may help administrators in educational institutions implement strategies to help students learn how to deal with stress. For internal stress factors, administrators can introduce workshops that help students change their perspective on stress to a growth mindset, goal setting, and overall well-being. Meanwhile, for external stress factors, administrators can focus on targeting factors such as financial needs, housing needs, communication between professors and students, and time management to meet deadlines.

Works Cited

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