
The paper I read outlined a research project that looked at the effects that the first year of college had on students’ overall health and wellness. The study was based on similar studies done of first-year law and medical students, which had shown that both groups of students experienced “significant distress during their first year” (Pritchard, Wilson, & Yamnitz, 2007, p.15). The researchers hypothesized that freshman would face similar stressors and therefore experience similar decreases in overall health. They also thought that “certain coping tactics, having a high self-esteem, being optimist and being extroverted would serve as buffers to health problems” (p.16). Data was collected by administering a series of surveys to incoming students during orientation week and again at the end of their first year. Physical health was assessed by asking a series of questions related to how often students had experienced health symptoms over the course of the past month. Participants were asked to use 4 to 6 point scales to measure levels of stress, perfectionism, self-esteem, optimism/pessimism, and personality as it related to introversion and extroversion. Data on alcohol use was also collected. The study had a total of 381 participants, with the majority being 18 and 19 year old, white women.

Consistent with the researchers’ hypothesis, health problems did increase over the course of the year as did the frequency with which students drank and the quantities they drank on the weekends (Pritchard et al., 2007). Surprisingly, the researchers did not find an overall increase in students’ stress levels from the beginning to end of the year. The researchers explained that this may have been due to the fact that the students were originally surveyed during orientation week and therefore may have already been under a great deal of stress. The data also showed that students who reported lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of perfectionism reported more physical health problems, while those who had higher levels of optimism reported fewer health problems. The researchers found no connections between extroversion and increased health. The researchers were able to conclude that the first year of college does have an effect on students’ overall physical health and frequency of engaging in negative health behaviors. They were also able to conclude that personality traits such as self-esteem, optimism, and perfection can play a significant role in students’ overall health.

I think that the data collected in this research project creates a venue with which to talk about stress management principles through the lens of student affairs. While the study does not provide empirical evidence that stress levels are directly connected to increased health problems in first-year students, a more subtle link is present. I strongly believe that this link would have been more well-defined if the students had completed their intake survey during the summer. Many students would have been under less stress and researchers could have made the distinction that stress during the summer was less likely to be caused by college life. With that said, it is also important to remember from our class discussion that a person can feel stress without being aware of it and this may also help to explain why actual stress levels did not increase over time.
I think that the most important and influential information to take away from this study is that the common effects of stress, “a combination of anxiety, tension, depression, anger, confusion, fatigue, and lack of vigor did increase” (Pritchard, et al., 2007, p.17) over the course of the year and therefore indicate that stress was having an affect on students’ behaviors. One example of behavior change was the more frequent and heavier drinking episodes that many students engaged in as the academic year progressed. It is important for student affairs professionals to realize the connection between alcohol abuse and stress management. Many students who drink or drug in excess are confronted by residence hall staff members, student conduct officers, and health center professionals to discuss their troubling drinking habits. When interacting with students in this capacity it is important to discuss the reasons behind their drinking and assess whether they are using alcohol to cope with stress. If they are using alcohol as a coping mechanism, professionals should work with students to develop alternative mechanisms as well as explain the additional stressors (legal troubles, unsafe sex practices, health problems) that come from engaging in frequent and heavy drinking.

On a larger scale, there must be collaboration between student health centers, recreation centers and counseling services to that educate students on the connection between overall wellness (physical, emotional, intellectual), stress management and personality traits. It is extremely important to keep the overlapping nature of these components at the forefront of programming because otherwise there is the tendency to develop cause and affect tunnel vision. This tunnel vision is seen in Pritchard et al. (2007) research because it indicates that low self-esteem, a pessimist attitude and/or perfectionism was the initial cause of maladaptive coping mechanisms which caused them to be more susceptible to health risks. Given the interconnectedness of all these factors, this is only one possible rationale. Students could have also found themselves dealing with a major health problem at the beginning of the year, missing significant amounts of class, doing poorly in courses, and therefore experiencing decreased self-esteem. For other students poor performance in the classroom could be the start of the downward spiral. Given the number of initial causes of student distress it is essential that university faculty and staff are aware of the support systems in place for students struggling with various levels and types of stress.

From a personal standpoint, I am often responsible for providing and recommending services and support to students to lessen the impact of the stressors they face in college. As a conduct officer, I spend a lot of time talking with students who have engaged in unhealthy alcohol and drug use. For many students these activities are ways to relax and socialize with friends. It is important that I take the time to address the concept of stress management with these students and help them develop alternative methods for relaxing and socializing. At the same time it is important to address and try and support students who are dealing with additional stressors as a result of their violation. Some students experience economic stress as a result of having to pay court fines. Some students experience academic stress as a result of having to miss classes or thinking about the consequences of their actions too much. I must keep a working knowledge of various support systems available to students in order to help them cope in healthy ways and therefore avoid future stressors.