



The Longitudinal Effects of School Belonging, Psychological Competency, Depressive Symptoms and Gender on the College Adjustment for First-Year, First-Generation College Students



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INTRODUCTION

- First-generation college students are defined as students whose parents/guardians have not participated in postsecondary education.
- Compared to continuing-generation college students, first-generation college students report lower school belonging which predicts depressive symptoms, stress, and consequently, college adjustment.
- Due to much of the previous literature employing cross-sectional methodologies, the longitudinal nature of these relationships is not yet fully understood.

STUDY AIM

To understand the longitudinal effects of school belonging, anxiety and depressive symptoms, perceived stress (i.e. psychological competency and psychological vulnerability), and gender on college adjustment for first-generation college students across their first year of college

METHOD

- A total of 43 first-year first-generation college students at a liberal arts institution in Southern California were recruited to participate in this longitudinal study
- Data was collected over three time points: one week before the first day of classes (T1), at end of their first- (T2) and second- (T3) semesters.
- Participants completed a series of self-report measures. Incentives included monetary compensation, information for on-campus and off-campus health resources, and light refreshments.

MEASURES

- Demographics.** Participants reported their race and ethnicity, age, gender, and income.
- School Belonging.** Participants are asked to indicate the extent to which they disagree or agree with 5 statements about their college environment that impact one’s sense of belonging ($\alpha = 0.82$).
- Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI).** A 21-item measure assessing the severity of anxiety symptoms ($\alpha = 0.93$).
- Patient Health Questionnaire – 9 (PHQ-9).** A 9-item questionnaire designed to assess the presence of depressive disorder diagnoses and severity of depression symptoms ($\alpha = 0.82$).
- Perceived Stress Scale (PSS).** A 12-item scale that assesses the degree to which situations in one’s life are appraised as stressful. The PSS has two subscales: psychological competency ($\alpha = 0.88$) and psychological vulnerability ($\alpha = .90$).
- End-Term Adjustment to College Measure.** A 6-item measure designed to assess one’s global, social, and academic adjustment to college.

ANALYTIC PLAN

- First, correlations were conducted of hypothesized predictor variables at T2 with college adjustment at T3.
- Next, significant correlates were used in multiple regression analyses for each subscale, while controlling for the effect of gender.

RESULTS

Table 1
Descriptives and Correlations Among Variables of Interest

Overall										
Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. School Belonging	3.93 ¹	0.94	--							
2. Anxiety Symptoms	11.44 ¹	10.71	-.13	--						
3. Depression Symptoms	8.36 ¹	5.72	-.49*	.68**	--					
4. Psychological Competency	2.43 ¹	0.78	.27	-.41	-.46*	--				
5. Psychological Vulnerability	2.48 ¹	0.82	-.39	.67**	.71**	-.48*	--			
6. Global Adjustment	4.72 ²	1.17	.60*	-.45	-.56*	.55*	-.44	--		
7. Social Adjustment	4.46 ²	1.62	.59*	-.23	-.28	-.19	-.22	.46	--	
8. Academic Adjustment	3.54 ²	1.40	.06	-.36	-.51*	.56*	-.37	.43	.10	--

Note. SD = standard deviation
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; ¹ $n = 36$, ² $n = 35$

Table 2
Multiple Regression Analysis of Predictors of Global Adjustment

Variable	B	Std. Error	β
Gender	-0.579	0.303	-0.301 [†]
Depressive Symptoms	-0.028	0.029	-0.168
Psychological Competency	0.498	0.221	0.415*
School Belonging	0.396	0.163	0.385*

Note. [†] $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
T2 predictor variables were used to predict T3 outcome variable

Table 3
Multiple Regression Analysis of Predictors of Social Adjustment

Variable	B	Std. Error	β
Gender	-0.273	0.487	-0.085
School Belonging	1.052	0.260	0.613***

Note. [†] $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
T2 predictor variables were used to predict T3 outcome variable

Table 4
Multiple Regression Analysis of Predictors of Academic Adjustment

Variable	B	Std. Error	β
Gender	-0.833	0.363	-0.370*
Depressive Symptoms	0.059	0.034	-0.303 [†]
Psychological Competency	0.799	0.263	0.569**

Note. [†] $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
T2 predictor variables were used to predict T3 outcome variable

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DISCUSSION

School Belonging

- School belonging predicted global and social adjustment, but not academic adjustment.
- School belonging measure focuses on the quality one’s interpersonal relationships with others at the institution and the institution itself.

Psychological Competency

- Psychological competency predicted global and academic adjustment, but not social adjustment.
- Greater ability to effectively cope with stressors may aid one’s ability to address college adjustment concerns.

Depressive Symptoms

- Depressive symptoms showed trends for academic adjustment
- Depressive symptoms may elicit self-doubts about one’s performance capacity, including academic, which may interfere with optimal functioning.

Gender

- Gender predicted academic adjustment, showed trends for global adjustment, but did not predict social adjustment.
- Potentially due to differences in social support networks and attitudes towards help-seeking behaviors

Implications

- Interventions can target psychology predictors of college adjustment at critical periods.
- Institutions of higher education can learn how to appropriately allocate institutional and individual resources.

Limitations

- Small sample size limited the power of our analyses.
- Findings can only speak to college adjustment for first-year, first-generation college students.
- Findings may only generalize to other liberal arts colleges.

Future Directions

- Investigate whether these findings are unique to first-generation college students.
- Extend observations of this sample to investigate whether the predictive factors of their college adjustment remain constant across time.

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