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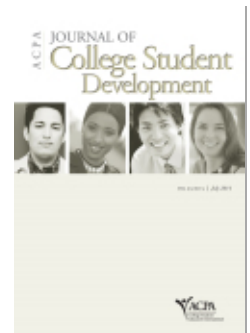
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Psychological Profile of University Students with Different Types of Disabilities

Shengli Dong Margaretha S. Lucas

Increasing numbers of students with disabilities attend colleges and universities after graduation from high school (DaDeppo, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2002), but studies show that students with disabilities lag behind academically and fail to make progress and complete academic programs at a level and a timeframe comparable to their peers without disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Studies are needed that explore variables related to the academic performance of university students with disabilities.

According to Tinto (1993), multiple factors relate to university students' academic performance and persistence, including students' background, academic and social integration, and personal characteristics. His theoretical model highlights the role of personal attributes in relation to academic success and persistence in postsecondary education.

Much of the research conducted in the area of personal characteristics of students with disabilities has focused on only academic or cognitive attributes (Hall & Webster, 2008), while neglecting psychological attributes such as self-esteem, life satisfaction, perceived support, and perceived control. As these psychological attributes have been found to play important roles in adjustment to one's disabilities and academic performance (LaBarbera, 2008), this area of study needs attention.

In addition to a narrow focus on academic and cognitive attributes, research related to academic success and persistence of students

with a disability has concentrated almost exclusively on students with a learning disability (LD; DaDeppo, 2009; LaBarbera, 2008). But, given advances in medical, educational, and environmental technologies and the fact that federal laws mandate improved access to postsecondary education (Newman, 2005; Skinner, 2004) to all, the scope of studies needs to be expanded to include those with other disabilities.

The goal of the current study was to compare and contrast psychological attributes of students with different types of disabilities who enter college. Findings might suggest ways to make the academic environment more conducive to learning for students with different types of disabilities.

METHOD

Procedure

Incoming first-year students at a large American mid-Atlantic university completed the University New Student Census (UNSC), a 230-item questionnaire given each year after students' summer orientation program. The survey is composed of both psychometrically developed scales and a variety of demographic items. The purpose of this annual survey is to gain an understanding of the attitudes and behaviors of incoming first-year students.

Participants

A total of 1,991 out of 3,915 first-year students

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responded to the 2008-2009 UNSC. The sample used for the current study was the 1,226 students who responded to the question inquiring about their disability status. Of these, 51% were female, 49% were male; 61% were White, 14% were Asian, 13% were Black or African American, and 6% were Latino. Thirty seven students (3%) reported psychological disabilities, 25 (2%) reported cognitive disabilities, 21 (1.7%) reported physical disabilities, and 1,143 (93.3%) indicated no disability.

Measures and Analyses

Demographic variables included gender, ethnicity, and disability status. Disability status was measured by the following question on the survey: "Which of the following best describes your disability? Disability options include Learning Disabled, Attention Deficit Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Physical Disability, Psychological, Hard of Hearing, Visual Impairment, others and 'no disability'." We collapsed Learning Disabled, Attention Deficit Disorder, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder into one status and named it Cognitive Disorder, as these disabilities are known in the field to be related (Web Accessibility in Mind, 2010). We used only the Psychological, Cognitive, Physical, and No Disability statuses, as the frequencies in the other statuses were too low for comparison.

Additionally, we examined five psychological attributes: life satisfaction, self-esteem, perceived constraints (perception of the extent to which an individual believes there are obstacles beyond one's control that interfere with reaching one's goals), social supports, and attitudes toward seeking help, and we compared participants' scores across types of disability, using ANOVA and Tukey's as a post hoc test. Life satisfaction was measured by the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener,

Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Self-esteem was measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Perceived constraints were measured by the Constraints Perception Scale (Lachman & Weaver, 1998). Social support was measured by the Multi-dimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). Help-seeking was measured by the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (Fischer & Farina, 1995). All these scales are psychometrically developed, demonstrating good reliability and validity. Information on psychometrics is available from the authors upon request.

RESULTS

As shown by the means and the ranges of the scales in Table 1, all participants reported relatively high life satisfaction, self-esteem, perceived constraints, social support, and psychological help-seeking. However, significant differences emerged between students who reported a psychological disability and all others, especially those reporting no disability. Participants with psychological disabilities scored significantly lower than all others (those with cognitive disability, physical disability, or no disability) on self-esteem ($M = 28.97$, $SD = 4.71$ versus $M = 34.20$, $SD = 4.28$ [cognitive]; $M = 33.21$, $SD = 3.82$ [physical]; and $M = 33.66$, $SD = 4.37$ [no]). Furthermore, participants with psychological disabilities scored significantly lower than those with no disabilities on two other attributes ($M = 14.86$, $SD = 4.44$ versus $M = 16.47$, $SD = 3.23$ on social support of family, and $M = 15.03$, $SD = 4.12$ versus $M = 16.96$, $SD = 2.88$ on social support of friends). Those reporting a psychological disability also scored significantly higher on two factors than those who indicated no disabilities ($M = 24.82$, $SD = 8.02$ versus $M = 21.10$, $SD = 3.38$

on perceived constraints, and $M = 29.72$, $SD = 5.17$ versus $M = 25.55$, $SD = 4.38$ on psychological help-seeking). Finally, students who reported a psychological disability scored significantly lower on life satisfaction than students who reported a cognitive disability ($M = 22.87$, $SD = 7.33$ versus $M = 26.28$, $SD = 6.70$). No other significant differences among the groups were found. On all but the self-esteem variable, the standard deviations for the participants reporting any type of disability were larger than for those who reported no disability, showing relatively large variability in responses by those who reported a disability.

To assess equality of variances of these unequal sample sizes, we applied Levene's test of homogeneity of variance to the data. The results were not significant except for the Social Support-Friend variable, suggesting that comparing the groups on this variable is questionable.

DISCUSSION

Even though the findings in this study show much variability among those reporting a disability, those reporting psychological disabilities present a profile unique from those with other disabilities, and especially different from those reporting no disability. Their level of self-esteem is significantly lower than that of the other three groups, and they also report relatively low life satisfaction, perceive little social support from family and friends, and perceive obstacles beyond their control that interfere with reaching their goals. Compared to the other groups, they more often see the need to seek help for psychological problems.

Even though this group might be inclined to seek psychological services on campus, they are not apt to seek help at the university disability support service to receive academic accommodations, as was found in a large sample of an earlier study by Dong and Lucas (2013).

TABLE 1. Means and Standard Deviations on Psychological Variables by Self-Reported Disability Status

Variable	N	Scale Range	Psychological (N = 37)		Cognitive (N = 25)		Physical (N = 21)		No Disability (N = 1,143)		F	Sig.
			M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Life Satisfaction	1,576	5-35	22.87 _a	7.33	26.28 _b	6.70	22.95 _{ab}	6.25	26.13 _{ab}	5.83	5.51	.01
Self-Esteem	1,886	10-40	28.97 _a	4.71	34.20 _b	4.28	33.21 _b	3.82	33.66 _b	4.37	13.61	.01
Perceived Constraints	1,669	6-30	24.82 _a	8.02	24.80 _{ab}	11.09	23.43 _{ab}	7.18	21.10 _b	3.38	4.38	.05
Social Support-Family	1,701	4-20	14.86 _a	4.44	16.20 _{ab}	3.64	15.05 _{ab}	3.51	16.47 _b	3.23	4.07	.05
Social Support-Friend	1,709	4-20	15.03 _a	4.12	16.12 _{ab}	3.43	16.57 _{ab}	2.54	16.96 _b	2.88	5.72	.01
Help-Seeking	1,854	10-40	29.72 _a	5.17	25.56 _{ab}	5.57	27.05 _{ab}	5.40	25.55 _b	4.38	10.86	.01

Note. Mean scores that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$ or $p < .01$.

In the larger study, only about 10% of students with psychological disabilities registered with the university disability support service, and a significantly high percentage failed to register for classes in their first and second semesters.

As Tinto (1993) suggested, a student's success in postsecondary education is closely related to his/her social and academic involvement in a postsecondary setting. While students reporting a psychological disability do seem to need help, the findings in the current study indicate that a combination of psychological factors may prevent them from seeking accommodations and utilizing disability support services or even registering for classes, as was found in the earlier study by Dong and Lucas (2013). It is possible that these students' low self-esteem and life satisfaction, their feeling that they face overwhelming barriers while perceiving little support from those around them, result in withdrawal, keeping these students from advocating for themselves and taking on challenges.

Students with cognitive disabilities demonstrated a higher level of psychological health than students with psychological disabilities. However, this finding should be considered with caution. Some research shows that students with cognitive disabilities find it difficult to assess their own strengths and weaknesses (Rath & Royer, 2002). According to these researchers, students with cognitive disabilities often have unrealistic and overly optimistic views of their abilities and challenges. This is a concern because, in our previous study with a larger sample (Dong & Lucas, 2013), a significant number of students reporting a cognitive disability met with academic difficulties including dropout and dismissal. Also, we found in the same study that only one third of these students registered with the university's disability support office.

The findings in this study support Allen, Robbins, and Sawyer's (2010) suggestions that

institutions should identify both academic issues (academic failures, dropout, dismissal, etc.) and social integration issues (utilization of campus resources such as counseling centers, assistive learning, and disability support services) for students with different types of disabilities. Such an alignment will lead to better knowledge of students' individual differences (e.g., motivation, propensity for social engagement, and self-perception) in order to match these with specific interventions, some of which will be discussed below.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Limitations of the study include the fact that results are based on self-report, which suggests a subjective component to the findings. However, in this study we were concerned precisely with students' perceptions because we know that their action or lack thereof will be based on how they perceive their circumstances. Knowing about student perceptions allows us to create interventions in line with their perceived needs. In addition, the variance of the Social Support-Friend variable was not equal for all groups, so comparing the groups on this variable is questionable. As well, caution should be taken when trying to generalize findings beyond the scope of the sample for this study, as the numbers in the groups were small.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Counselors, including disability support service professionals, need to take a proactive and personal approach in collaboration with other on-campus programs (such as orientation offices, learning assistance programs, and counseling centers) to integrate services for

students with a disability, especially during orientation and campus tours for incoming students. These professionals need to educate incoming students and their families on the types of academic and social challenges students with disabilities may encounter, and introduce services that can help to mitigate possible frustration and confusion early on in students' academic careers.

Furthermore, professionals should tailor their services to the specific needs of students with different disabilities. As was shown in the current study, those reporting a psychological disability tended to have low self-esteem, saw obstacles beyond their control, and perceived little support from family and friends. Professionals on campus might want to initiate outreach services (connecting with high school counselors, transition coordinators, and students) before these students enter the university. Providing personal contact with the students might create personal connections, which may make these students feel comfortable and valued, helping them gain a sense of confidence. This, in turn, will assist them to become and remain involved academically and socially on campus.

Students who report a cognitive disability may not recognize the impact of their disability on their academic performance, and may not see the need to seek assistance. Counseling professionals should provide services in a manner that both invites students to pay attention to their strengths and aids them to assess the impact of their disability on their academic performance in an individualized and objective manner. Strategies like this help all students, but especially those with a disability, thrive in postsecondary education.

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