

ROLE OF PERCEIVED SUPPORT FROM PARENTS AND ON- AND OFF-CAMPUS FRIENDS IN FIRST- AND NON-FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS' LIFE SATISFACTION

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ABSTRACT

First-year college students, especially first-generation attendees (FGC; neither parent finished college), often have difficulties adjusting to school. The present study examines the social and instrumental support these students receive during their first year of college and its role in their life satisfaction, a dimension of psychological well-being (Jenkins et al., 2013). In this study, 244 first-year college students (107 FGC) completed an online survey that asked about their perceived support and instrumental help from parents and on- and off-campus friends, as well as the students' overall life satisfaction. Results showed that, regardless of college-generation status, students reported feeling more social support than instrumental help from family and off-campus friends. For both FGC students and non-FGC students, there was a positive relationship between perceived social support and help from family and friends and student's satisfaction with life. The findings suggest that university professionals should try to involve families and other supportive persons, including on- and off-campus friends, in students' first-year college experience to help students adjust to this new setting.

KEYWORDS: *First Year Experience; Support, Friends and Family; Life Satisfaction*



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INTRODUCTION

Life satisfaction, defined as subjective wellbeing about one's life, has been found to predict college student retention (Diener et al., 1985; Krumrei-Mancuso, Newton, Kim, & Wilcox, 2013). The importance of life satisfaction may be especially important for students with lower college retention rates, including first-generation and Latinx students (Becker, Schelbe, Romano, & Spinelli, 2017; Ojeda, Castillo, Rosales, & Pina-Watson, 2014). First-generation college students (FGC) are individuals whose parents or guardians have not attained a bachelor's degree (Davis, 2010). Compared to non-FGC students, FGC students have difficulty adjusting to college as measured by academic performance, sense of belonging, and loneliness (Gibbons, Rhinehart, & Hardin, 2019; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). In addition, FGC students often have fewer financial resources and can experience low levels of social or emotional support about college. Although research has identified the importance of life satisfaction for FGC college student outcomes, the impact of family and friends on students' life satisfaction has received little study (Garriott, Hudyma, Keene, & Santiago, 2015; Navarro, Ojeda, Schwartz, Piña-Watson, & Luna, 2014). In the present study, we investigate FGC and non-FGC students' perceived support and help from family and friends and the relation of these factors to students' sense of life satisfaction in the first year of college.

Some research has found that attending and succeeding in college may not always result in increased life satisfaction for FGC students (Davis, 2010; Garriott et al., 2015). However, other research has shown that individuals who feel supported during college can increase both academic performance and psychological wellbeing (Becker et al., 2017). The present study examines the link between perceived social support and life satisfaction in a college setting. One reason FGC students may not show high levels of life satisfaction in college is that they may feel disconnected from family and friends, perhaps as a result of their educational aspirations. Some students may even feel a sense of guilt in pursuing their educational goals while their family is struggling at home, a feeling that may be especially pronounced for low-income students (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). This so-called family achievement guilt may affect how FGC students perceive and experience college and, in turn, influence students' emotional wellbeing and academic adjustment (Becker et al., 2017).

Many students find the transition to higher education more stressful than anticipated and face many stressors in academic, social, and personal areas (Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, & Duron, 2013). Support from others may help students adjust to this new setting (Bronkema & Bowman, 2019; Swenson, Nordstrom, &

Hiester, 2008). Support, defined broadly, includes reassurance, availability, and loyalty of individuals who are closely connected to the student such as family members and friends (Goldsmith, McDermott, & Alexander, 2000). Friedlander and colleagues (2007) found that college students receive support from multiple sources, including family members and friends both on- and off-campus. Social support can help beginning college students combat feelings of insignificance as well as bolster student autonomy during the transition to a university (Shukla & Joshi, 2017). A student's perception of support from others can also have a buffering effect when confronting distressing situations (Friedlander et al., 2007; Reid, Bowman, Espelage, & Green, 2016).

As this research suggests, social support plays an important role in students' college experiences and may also contribute to life satisfaction or a subjective sense of well-being in the first year of college (Bronkema & Bowman, 2019; Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013). Social support is often coupled with helpfulness, which is practical advice that pertains to a specific problem or activity (Goldsmith et al., 2000). However, whether the help someone offers is useful depends on how it is perceived by the individual in need. In this context, perceived helpfulness entails how students view a resource, including another person, as helping them overcome stressors as they begin college. When they occur together, support and helpfulness may boost motivation and enable a student to overcome difficulties in the first year of college. This process, in turn, can help increase a student's life satisfaction during this transition period (Krumeri-Mancuso et al., 2013; Lästch, 2017).

The purpose of the present study is twofold. First, it examines the social support and help that FGC and non-FGC students receive from family and friends in the first year of college. FGC students have different struggles about college compared to non-FGC students, which suggests that the support these students need from family and friends may also differ (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Garriott et al., 2015). For instance, FGC students who experience familial achievement guilt may be less likely to ask their parents for help, resulting in lower perceived support from parents (Becker et al., 2017). A recent study suggests a more complex picture of types of support FGC students receive, in which they tend to perceive less instrumental help but were just as likely as their non-FGC peers to feel emotionally supported by their parents (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). In probing support from friends, we differentiate friends who are on- and off-campus because both may contribute, albeit in different ways, to student adjustment in the first year of college. The second purpose of this study is to investigate how social support and help from family and friends relate to self-reported life satisfaction of FGC and non-FGC students in the first year of college.

Research Questions

RQ1: Do FGC and non-FGC students perceive different levels of support and help from their parents and on- and off-campus friends?

Hypothesis 1: Based on previous research suggesting that students receive support from multiple sources and that FGC students have less available resources than non-FGC students do (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Friendlander et al., 2007; Nichols & Islas, 2015), we predicted that FGC and non-FGC students will differ in their perceived support of parents and friends.

RQ2: Who provides support and help for first-year college students and is there a difference between what is provided by people on- and off-campus?

Hypothesis 2: Given previous literature suggesting that first-year college students get much of their support from people with whom they are in established relationships, we expect that both FGC and non-FGC students will report greater perceived support and help from their off-campus family and friends than on-campus friends (Shukla & Joshi, 2017).

RQ 3 (exploratory): Do students report differences in the usefulness of the support and help?

Hypothesis 3: With recent studies differentiating the types and utility of support and help students receive (Nichols & Islas, 2015; Palbusa & Gauvain, 2019), we expect FGC and non-FGC students will differ in their perceptions of the usefulness of the support and help they receive in addressing their college concerns.

RQ 4: Do perceived support and help from family members and friends relate to first-year college students' reported life satisfaction?

Hypothesis 4: In line with research suggesting the positive role of social support in increasing well-being, we hypothesized that perceived support and helpfulness will be positively related to subjective life satisfaction of first-year college students (Becker et al., 2017).

METHOD

Participants

An ethnically diverse sample of 244 first-year undergraduate students participated in this study. The ethnic representation was as follows: 53% Asian, 33% Latinx, 5% European American, 5% Mixed, and 3% African American, and 1% unreported. The sample ranged in age from 18 to 21 years ($M_{age} = 18.29$, $SD_{age} = 0.52$), and was evenly split by gender (52% female). Almost half the sample (44%) were first-generation college students. They were recruited from the Psychology Department participant pool at a large, public

university and received research credit and raffle tickets for movie passes.

Procedure and Measures

Participants completed an online survey in one sitting using SurveyGizmo. Survey completion time averaged 40 minutes. In the survey, the participants provided demographic information. They also completed questionnaires about *Perceived Support and Helpfulness* and *Satisfaction with Life*, described more later. Finally, they responded to several open-ended questions about their college experience. College-generation status was obtained through university admissions records that included the highest level of education for each parent.

Perceived Support and Helpfulness. This measure is a subscale of the *Communication with On-Campus Friends* and the *Communication with Off-Campus Contacts* measures (Cheong, Gauvain, & Palbusa, 2019). This 18-item scale asked participants to rate the extent of support ($\alpha = .88$; 1 = *not supportive at all*, 4 = *extremely supportive*) and extent of help ($\alpha = .89$; 1 = *not helpful at all*, 4 = *extremely helpful*) received from friends (on- and off-campus) and parents.

Satisfaction with Life. This 5-item scale assessed participants' satisfaction with life and a subjective sense of well-being (Diener et al., 1985). A sample item is "the conditions of my life are excellent." Participants rated items on a 7-point scale ($\alpha = .88$; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Ratings were summed and then averaged, with higher scores indicating greater life satisfaction.

Open-ended questions. Three open-ended questions asked participants to describe concerns they have had in college, the people they have talked to about these concerns, and how talking to them has helped the student in dealing with the concerns.

RESULTS

To compare perceived support and helpfulness from family members (parents) and on- and off-campus friends in FGC and non-FGC students, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted. Contrary to the prediction, FGC and non-FGC students did not differ in their perceived support and helpfulness from on-campus friends (support: $t(224) = 0.97$, $p = .33$; helpfulness: $t(223) = -0.31$, $p = .75$), off-campus friends (support: $t(218) = -0.04$, $p = .97$; helpfulness: $t(219) = 0.51$, $p = .61$), and parents (support: $t(220) = -0.49$, $p = .62$; helpful: $t(220) = -0.93$, $p = .35$). Thus, data from both student groups are combined for subsequent analyses.

A paired samples *t*-test was used to determine if there was a differ-

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ence between the levels of perceived support and helpfulness across different sources of support. All students reported more support from off-campus friends ($M = 2.58, SD = 0.68, t(204) = -5.48, p < .001$), and parents ($M = 2.50, SD = 0.73, t(205) = -2.81, p < .01$) than on-campus friends ($M = 2.33, SD = 0.64$). They also reported greater helpfulness from off-campus friends ($M = 2.31, SD = 0.74$) than on-campus friends ($M = 2.12, SD = 0.66, t(204) = -3.64, p < .001$), and parents ($M = 2.13, SD = 0.78, t(200) = 2.47, p = .01$) (see **Figure 1**).

The open-ended questions were examined to see if students still felt supported even though a clear solution or remedy for their problem or stressor was not received from the contact.

For example, a student who had trouble with schoolwork asked their friend for support, who reported: “*He told me that I could do it and that I needed time to rest.*” Another student who expressed feeling lost and unmotivated in academics responded that support: “*... made me realize that I was not alone because they were going through the same exact problems.*”

These responses suggest that while no tangible solutions to resolve an issue were provided, students nonetheless reported feeling supported. An example of a student who received support and found it helpful described that when he was near to failing a class and went to a friend for support, the friend provided support, “*I spoke to my friend since we both had the same class. It helped tons because we helped one another confront difficulties and work together to pass.*” This student mentioned that their friend was supportive and offered a way to help alleviate the problem. Responses to the open-ended questions suggest that students can feel supported even though they

report getting varying levels of instrumental support.

Measures of perceived support and helpfulness across the three social groups (parents, on- and off-campus friends) were intercorrelated. A Pearson’s Bivariate Correlation showed a positive relation between perceived support and life satisfaction, such that perceptions of support from parents ($r = .30, p < .001$) and on- ($r = .34, p < .001$) and off-campus ($r = .20, p < .001$) friends were associated with higher life satisfaction. Perceived helpfulness from parents ($r = .30, p < .001$), and on- ($r = .31, p < .001$) and off-campus ($r = .21, p < .01$) friends was also associated with higher life satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the role of support and help from families and friends in students’ psychological well-being as they transition to college. In contrast to previous studies showing that FGC students are likely to perceive that the support they need is not available (Dennis et al., 2005; Nichols & Islas, 2015), our findings showed that FGC students were just as likely as non-FGC students to perceive support and help from their family and friends. The present findings also revealed a complex nature of support for these students. That is, regardless of college-generation status, first-year students reported that parents and friends are supportive but not necessarily helpful in addressing their college concerns. Students reported receiving more support from off-campus contacts, both parents and friends, than from on-campus friends, with off-campus friends seen as more helpful than parents. These findings are consistent with previous studies that preexisting relationships with people off-campus are a source of support for first-year college students, and that established peer relationships may be especially important (Friedlander et al., 2007; Shukla & Joshi, 2017). The open-ended responses suggest that students may feel greater help from friends relative to parents because they are of similar age and likely have many shared experiences. Indeed, in some cases, the off-campus friends were also students and experiencing similar challenges as the participants.

The present findings also showed that both support and the helpfulness of the support were related to greater life satisfaction for first-year students. This is consistent with previous research, suggesting the importance of social support in students’ psychological wellbeing (Jenkins et al., 2013). Given the positive role of off-campus contacts (i.e., families and friends) in first-year college students’

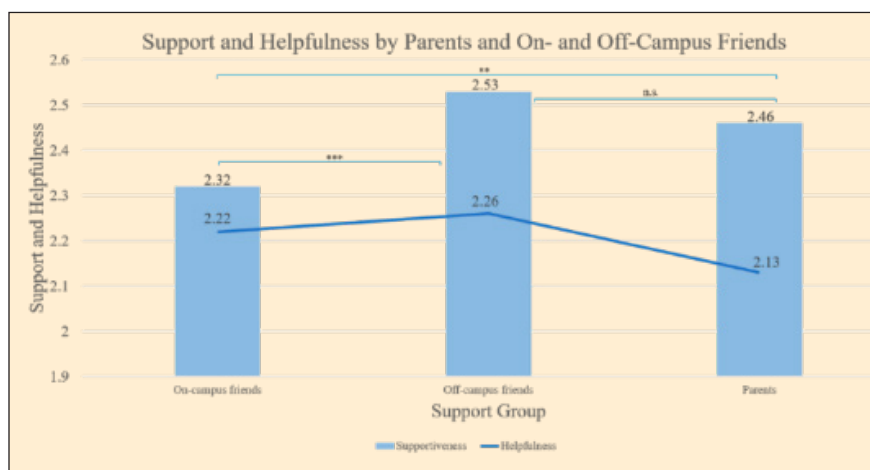


Figure 1. Perceived support and helpfulness by support group.

psychological well-being, the findings have practical implications for university professionals. Specifically, they suggest involving families and supportive persons from beyond the campus in first-year students' lives during their transition to college. This may be especially important for FGC students who may feel ambivalent or even guilty about attending college because their parents did not have the same opportunity or because they are presently working very hard to enable the student to attend college (Becker et al., 2017).

The study is not without limitations. The data are cross-sectional and, therefore, the direction of the relations is unknown. Moreover, previous studies suggest that other factors, such as staying connected with cultural heritage values, may also contribute to students' life satisfaction (Krumerei-Mancuso et al., 2013; Navarro et al., 2014). Another limitation is the generalizability of our findings due to the institution's demographics. In this institution, the Latinx community is not in the minority; results may differ in institutions with different demographics (Ojeda et al., 2014).

Our findings suggest that students who feel supported by a range of social support personnel have higher life satisfaction. However, whether this pattern remains the same as students advance in their college career is not answered in these data. As to the experience of FGC students, future research might include narrative reports that probe how and why these students consider the support to be helpful. This research may help identify areas in which FGC students need more instrumental support that impact their educational trajectories. Both FGC and non-FGC students benefit from feelings of support from family and friends, and in both groups, these feelings relate to students' life satisfaction. These findings underscore the important role of support systems as students launch their college careers.

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