Stress, Coping, and Academic Outcomes in First-Generation College Students

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Abstract

This study examined associations among stress, coping resources, and academic progress in first- and continuing-generation college students. Results showed that the relationship between stress and institutional supports was dependent upon first-generation status. Specifically, the relationship was negative and significant for first-generation, but not continuing generation college students. Furthermore, the indirect effect of stress on academic progress was dependent upon first-generation status. There was an inverse, significant indirect effect through institutional supports for first-generation, but not continuing-generation students. Findings point to the importance of institutional supports for first-generation college students.

Background

- According to recent estimates, 27% of graduating high school seniors and one in every six students on a university campus is a first-generation college student.
- Lower social capital, greater exposure to classism, and cultural mismatches with institutional norms may be unique sources of stress for first-generation college students.
- Stress may have a negative association with academic progress, particularly for first-generation college students.
- No studies have examined variations in expanatory links between stress and academic progress between first- and continuing-generation students.

Method

- Participants were 688 college students, 52.7% of whom would be the first in their family to receive a bachelor's degree.
- 79.2% white, 6.4% Mexican American, 5.4% Native American, 2.3% Multiracial, 1% African American, 0.6% Central American, 0.3% South American.
- 72.5% female
- Participants completed measures of academic progress, family and friend supports, institutional supports, reflective coping, and stress.
- SPSS Process (Hayes, 2013) was used for all statistical analyses.

Results

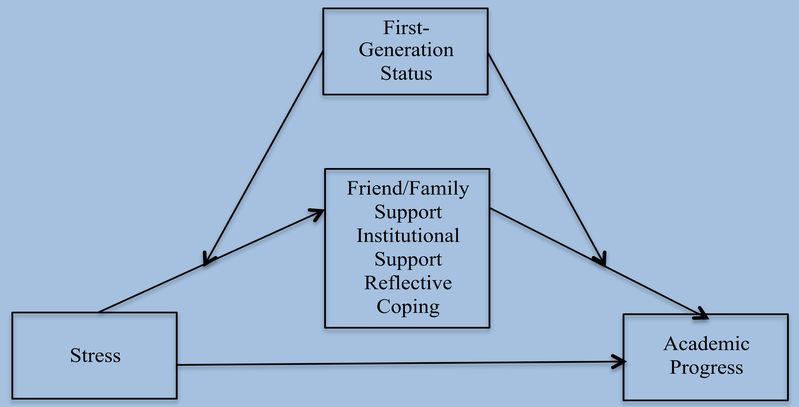
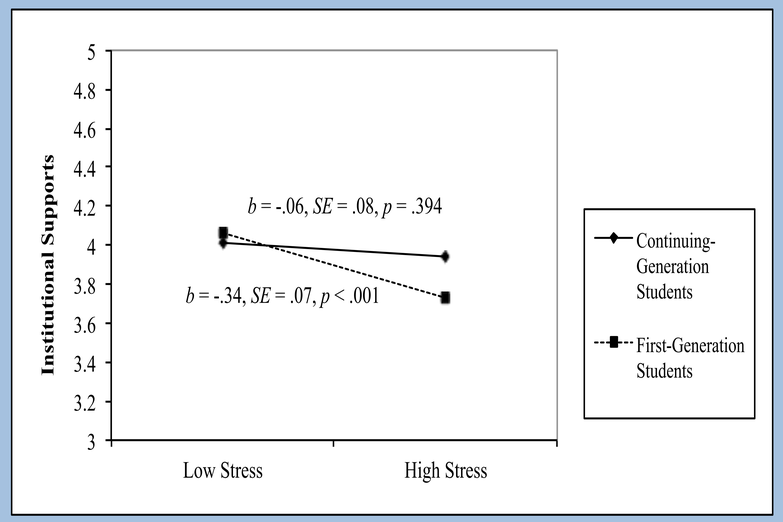
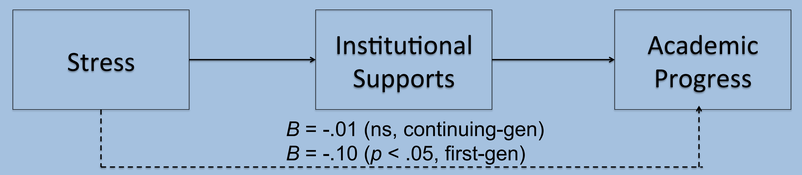


Figure 1. Hypothesized conditional process model of stress, coping resources, and academic progress.





Conclusions & Implications

- The relationship between stress and institutional supports was dependent upon first-generation status.
  - Stress is more strongly linked to institutional supports for first- compared to continuing-generation college students.
  - Counselors should explore links between stress and perceptions of institutional supports when working with first-gen students.
- The indirect effect from stress to academic progress through institutional supports was significant for first- but not continuing-generation students.
  - Structural campus supports (e.g., mentoring, advising, sense of belonging) explain the link between stress and academic progress for first-gen students.
  - Embedding structural supports within university systems and policies for first-generation students may aid in increasing their retention and academic well-being.
- Family and friend supports predicted academic progress across students, but did not mediate the relationship between stress and academic progress.
- Reflective coping mediated the relationship between stress and academic progress for first- and continuing-generation students.

References

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