A Relation between College Mentors and Transition Stress Among First-Year College Women

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ABSTRACT
College mentors are found in the college community and offer support, advice, and encouragement to students to help them achieve goals (Pfister 2004). In the present study, incoming students participated in programs implemented by a private women’s college that provided students with opportunities to establish mentoring relationships. The hypothesis was that a) students with one college mentor would report less stress than students without a mentor and b) students with multiple college mentors would experience less stress than students with only one college mentor. First-semester, female undergraduates (N = 199) completed a survey evaluating demographics, college mentors, and perceived stress. Stress scores in the mentor-present group (n = 155) were significantly lower (M = 120.97 of 287) than the mentor-absent group (n = 44; M = 130.13 of 287; t(197) = -1.98, p < .05.). The mentor-present group was further divided based on number of mentors (one, more than one or none). The findings of the study suggested stress reduction benefits apparent for those in the single and multiple mentors groups compared to students without mentors. Thus, these findings suggest that establishing at least one college mentor can be associated with lowered stress, at least with the study’s limited demographic participants. However, the long term benefits of this relationship, and the characteristics of students who choose and do not choose mentors should be studied further.

For those students seeking a higher education, the first major life transition associated with the emerging adulthood life point is often that from high school to college. Shifting from a high school to a college setting may be an incubator for stress due to the often quick and numerous social, environmental and developmental changes associated with the transition (Cotterell, 2007). In most circumstances, college is the first time that many young adults are living and caring for themselves without being overseen by an adult or parental figure. These young adults may feel the pressure to take on a variety of different responsibilities and roles while still maintaining their role as a student.

Colleges frequently pair new students with faculty and/or peer mentors on the premise that such relationships may provide a supportive safety net for the first year transition, thereby increasing student retention. However, methodological and definitional
inconsistencies have plagued empirical research on the impact of mentoring relationships, limiting the amount of clear data available to practitioners (Jacobi, 1991; Gershenfeld, 2014).

**Stress, Separation Anxiety, and Academic Success**

Research by Mirsa, McKean, West, & Russo (2000) used the Perceived Stress Scale to analyze stress and anxiety in students. Mirsa et al. (2000) determined that although a moderate level of stress for students was appropriate, operating at high levels of stress may result in decreased academic performance, specifically for underclassmen. Seligman and Wuyek (2007) researched separation anxiety symptoms and how these symptoms related to the student’s educational decisions and performance. Participants completed two self-reported surveys: the Adult Separation Anxiety symptoms checklist (Manicavasgar, Silove, Curtis & Wagner, 2000), and the Separation Anxiety Symptom Inventory (Silove et al., 1993). Results determined that many students operated at high levels of stress but were capable of maintaining their usual levels of academic performance. The apparently conflicting findings of Mirsa et al. (2000) and Seligman and Wuyek (2007) prompted this study to further dissect transition stress in this population. Academic performance is not the only gauge of student adaptation to the college environment. A broader assessment of transition stress, as well as the exploration of moderating variables, such as social support, may therefore be warranted.

**Mentoring Relationships as a Stress Reducer**

While the aforementioned research indicated a high prevalence for stress in most first-year college students, recent research has also provided a basis for assessing social support as a buffer to stress (Pfister, 2004). Strong social support networks in the college environment may come in the form of peers, faculty, and/or organizations.

Pfister (2004) argued that because mentors can provide an inexperienced individual with guidance and support, mentors can be effective stress reducers in the academic environment. Strong social support from an individual in the college network may provide opportunities for first-year students to better participate in social integration into the academic environment. Prior research by Rayle and Chung (2008) found that an increase of social support and integration also decreased the likelihood of reported academic stress. Similarly, Pfister found that students who were mentored by a faculty member perceived more social support than those in the peer-mentored group. Social support resources were viewed as a form of stress reduction because these resources were sought out when individuals could not manage their stress levels. Social support resources were thought to provide some solutions to heightened stress, especially in the case of a mentor in an academic setting (Pfister, 2004).

Pascarella (1980) also examined the relation between student aspirations, educational success, and student informal contact with faculty. Pascarella’s findings suggested a positive correlation between student-faculty informal relationships and student college outcomes. Pascarella specifically examined the relationship between student satisfaction with college and frequency of informal, non-classroom contact with faculty. Results showed that the frequency of informal, non-classroom contact with faculty was positively associated with student satisfaction (Pascarella, 1980). Students with greater access to and communication with faculty reported significantly higher satisfaction with both their own academic and non-academic experiences at college.

Burlew’s research in business settings suggested that under some circumstances having multiple mentors may fulfill diverse needs such as guidance, support, and training (Burlew, 1991). Burlew’s findings, while predominately involving workers in a business environment, suggest that if greater access to a mentor results in higher satisfaction and
potentially reduced stress, then having multiple mentors may further enhance that adjustment. However, to date, research exploring this question has been limited and methodologically inconsistent (Gershenfeld, 2014).

**Measuring Stress**

For this study, adaptations of the Student Academic Stress Scale (Busari, 2011) and the Perceived Stress Scale (Maynor & Carbonara, 2012; Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983) were used to measure stress levels. Busari (2011) used the Perceived Stress Scale and an academic stress scale to determine academic stress of students. The Student Academic Stress Scale (SASS) was used to analyze the type of physiological, behavioral, cognitive and affective stress typical in university students (Busari, 2011). In this study, items for the SASS were totaled and higher scores were positively correlated with higher stress responses. Maynor and Carbonara (2012) used three surveys to examine the relationship between perceived stress and academic self-concept in pharmacy students and found that high stress scores correlated with low academic self-concept scores.

The purpose of the present study was to determine if college mentors were associated with reduced stress in the study group during the transition from high school to college. The hypothesis was that a) participants with a mentor would have less stress than participants without a mentor and b) participants with multiple college mentors would experience lowered perceived stress than students with a single college mentor.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants (N = 199) included female freshmen (class of 2017) attending a women’s college as traditional undergraduate students (ages 17-19). College policy required freshmen not residing with a close local relative to live on campus, thus approximately 85% percent of first semester students lived in the residence halls. Participants who did not live on campus (commuter students) were allowed to participate in the study, but their data were not included in this analysis. Participants under 18 were included with parental consent. Before data collection was initiated, the design was approved by the college’s and the department’s institutional review boards. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and participants were treated in accordance with the national guidelines for research with humans (APA, 2010). All participants gave informed consent prior to data collection and were provided with contact information for questions and concerns. The participants received no monetary compensation for the study, but were offered refreshments and an opportunity to submit names for a drawing of several $10 gift cards.

**Procedure**

The survey was administered in freshmen residence hall parlors by scheduling drop in hours from 7 to 9 p.m. on two evenings during the same week (a month after move-in to residential housing). This time point was chosen as it was assumed that most participants would have experienced some level of transitional stress. The test was administered far enough into the school term for participants to become partly settled into their schedules and to become acquainted with college-assigned peer and faculty mentors. All participants were given the same administrative directions by a team of recruited and trained data collectors. Participation was only granted to traditional first-year students (first-time in college, approximately 18 years old, and lived on campus).

Participants first were asked if a mentor was present or absent in their college environment in a check yes or no response. If participants answered ‘yes’ (mentor present), they were asked to check all types of college mentors that applied to them from a list of examples [i.e., faculty advisor, “Big Sis” (an informal mentor assigned to all freshmen), student advisor, resident assistant, upper-classman]. For the study’s purposes, all students were assumed to have had equal opportunity to establish a mentoring relationship.
with any of the provided examples. The college provided students with a variety of options for mentors through diverse programs initiated by the institution. Incoming students were exposed to these relationships from the moment they set foot onto campus (move-in day) and continued to meet with these advisors (faculty and peer) and informal mentors (Big Sis, resident advisor, and peer) throughout the first semester in college. Incoming students had opportunities to meet with all of these potential mentors both in groups with their peers and individually. However, just because the opportunity for mentoring relationships was present, all participants did not feel fulfilled by these mentors; thus, some participants indicated “no mentors.”

Participants were separated into groups based on mentor present (n = 155) or absent (n = 44) and number of mentors. Participants in the mentor present group were further divided into groups based on the reported number of mentors: Group 1 (n1 = 108) reported having a single mentor. Group 2 (n2 = 47) reported having multiple mentors, ranging from 2 to 4. Group 3 (n3 = 44) reported no college mentors.

Perceived stress was determined through the Stress Snapshot section of the survey adapted from the works of Busari (2011) and Maynor and Carbonara (2012). Stress was self-reported using a point Likert Scale (1 = strongly disagree/never applies to me; 4 = neutral, 7 = strongly agree/definitely applies to me). Questions were asked in both positive (i.e., “I am always busy but this does not bother me”) and negative (i.e., “My work load is always too much”) formats and offered face validity. Participants’ responses were summed and referred to as perceived stress scores. There were 41 total questions with a lowest possible stress score of 41. This score would result in the participant choosing “1 = strongly disagree/never applies to me” for all negatively formatted questions and “7 = strongly agree/definitely applies to me” for all positively formatted questions. The highest possible stress score was 287 and was indicative of high stress. This score would result from participants strongly agreeing (7) to all negative questions and strongly disagreeing (1) with all positive questions. The survey was untimed, but most participants completed the questionnaire in 20 to 30 minutes. Participants were allowed to skip questions or check “not applicable.” All participants were debriefed and released. Surveys and consent forms were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the psychology labs.

Results
In the study’s findings, the mentor-present group had a mean stress score of 120.97 points out of 287 possible points (SD = 24.09). The mentor-absent group had a mean stress score of 130.17 (SD = 30.23). In the initial analysis, an independent t-test was used to analyze the difference between the two groups. Results indicated that participants who had a mentor had significantly lower perceived stress than participants without a mentor [t(197) = -1.98, p < .05]. However, when the mentor present group was further divided, Group 1 (one mentor) had a mean stress score of 120.40 (SD = 24.20), Group 2 (multiple mentors) had a mean stress score of 121.63 (SD = 23.94), and Group 3 (no mentor) had a mean stress score of 130.17 (SD = 30.23). An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed no significant differences in perceived stress scores among the three groups F(2,196) = 2.349, p > .05. Although the independent t-test suggested that at least one college mentor was associated with less stress compared to participants with no college mentor, the ANOVA showed there was no significant difference in stress scores among Group 1 (one mentor) and Group 2 (multiple mentors).

Discussion
Study findings indicated that mentor present group had a significant decrease in stress levels compared to the mentor-absent group. Further analysis reflected no statistical difference in stress levels between those who had multiple mentors and those who had one mentor. This finding contradicts Burlew (1991), whose research claimed that multiple
mentors were necessary in order to provide
the skills and knowledge required to com-
plete the development of a mentee. Because
no significant difference in stress level was
found among Group 1 (one mentor) and
Group 2 (multiple mentors), the results in the
present study suggested that the number of
mentors does not affect stress, as long as at
least one mentor is present.

One limitation of the study was that the
sample was drawn from a small, liberal
arts institution, an institutional type which
Pascarella (1980) suggested may encourage
more informal student-faculty interaction
(e.g., causal loops). Pascarella’s findings
suggested that students in these type institu-
tions may seek relationships with faculty as
a result of pre-existing traits and conditions
which can promote student success. Such in-
teractions may lead to higher rates of mentor
relationships forming between students and
college staff members. The present study’s
sample reflected students in a college learn-
ing environment where informal contact
with faculty was frequent. According to
Pascarella, this prevalence of communication
with advisors and faculty may be greater in
small, liberal arts institutions as opposed to a
large university environment.

The present study findings supported
Pfister (2004) who suggested that mentors as
social support resources may provide a buffer
to transitional stress. Participants in the pres-
ent study who did not have a mentor dem-
onstrated heightened stress. However, Pfister
also found significantly less academic stress
in students who were mentored by a faculty
member compared to a peer. The present
study was not designed to investigate this
difference since half of the participants who
answered ‘mentor-present’ also had mul-
tiple mentors. These participants could not
be clustered into faculty-mentored and peer/
student-mentored groups because there was
no accurate way to decipher which mentor
(faculty or student) was most influential.

Additional limitations in the present study
included the following. The sample was
drawn from an all-women’s four year col-
lege and results cannot be generalized to
other women, men, high school students
and/or non-traditional students. The sample
was also drawn from a small private college;
therefore, institution size may also have an
effect on stress level and student expectations
of mentoring relationships. The survey was
distributed after two weeks of class and one
month after move-in day; participants may
not have had enough time to establish a long-
term mentor. The survey did not ask partici-
pants to report information regarding native
language, race or ethnicity, learning dis-
abilities or physical impairments. The Stress
Snapshot assumed an ability to read and write
in English. Other limitations include the po-
tential circumstance that study participants
may prefer other types of mentoring relation-
ships or feel fulfilled by the ones presented
by the college. Another explanation for the
varying number of reported mentors could be
that the present study did not offer a suffi-
ciently clear definition of a mentor.

Future research will be needed to further
understand the characteristics of the no men-
tor group and distinguish possible reasons for
students reporting no mentor (i.e., do not feel
they need a mentor, do not feel connected,
not enough time to establish a mentor). Future
studies might collect demographic in-
formation of the mentors and include a men-
tor-mentee satisfaction inventory to deter-
mine if the relationship is influential. Further
research could also investigate gender dif-
fferences and faculty-mentor versus peer/
student-mentor groups. In a planned second
wave of analysis, this project will collect data
on retention rates and GPA, and determine if
the participants maintain the same mentor
throughout their second year.
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References


