

Predictors of College Adjustment Among Hispanic Students¹

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to assess personal and interpersonal predictors of college adjustment among a sample of 190 first-year Hispanic students. Specifically, we examined the extent to which personal factors such as self-esteem, acculturation, and ethnic identity and interpersonal factors such as parental education and parental attachment predicted adjustment during the first year of college. A hierarchical regression revealed that students' personal and interpersonal variables were predictive of overall college adjustment during the first college year. Although independently related to overall college adjustment, interpersonal factors did not lead to a significant increase in variance explained in the dependent variable.

Adjusting to college is a major transition in a young adult's life. Unfortunately, a large percentage of students are unsuccessful in navigating this transition. In fact, the majority of students who depart their initial institution often leave during their first two years (ACT, 2002). Moreover, previous research has found that students who withdraw often do so for personal reasons such as a lack of adjustment to their new environment (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003; Kerr, Johnson, Gans, & Krumrine, 2004). As a

result, more research is needed to examine predictors of college adjustment, especially during students' first year (Grant-Vallone, Reid, Umali, & Pohlert, 2003-2004).

Furthermore, today's colleges are becoming more ethnically diverse. In fact, in 2002, 29.4% of students attending degree-granting institutions were minorities, reflecting an increase of 10% since 1990 (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). In addition, the population of Hispanics² enrolled in college increased by 68% between 1990 and 1999 (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Thus, greater attention needs to be paid to the unique needs of the growing population of Hispanic students. Although researchers have documented the influence of ethnicity on a range of outcome variables (Phinney & Chavira, 1995; Umaña-Taylor, Diversi, & Fine, 2002), more needs to be known about specific strategies that will predict college adjustment among Hispanic students. This knowledge is especially important because data continue to show that although the enrollment of Hispanic students in post-secondary education has increased over the last 20 years, as an ethnic group, they still remain less educated, with just over 10% of all Hispanics in the United States possessing a college degree (Brown, Santiago, & Lopez, 2003; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002).

Possible explanations for this disjuncture in educational status may be unfamiliarity on the part of Hispanic students with the process of finding out about and applying to universities, a process which some argue privileges White middle-class individuals (Loza, 2003). Hispanic parents who did not attend school in the U.S. may be unfamiliar with the requirements for acceptance into American colleges and universities and thus unable to guide their children in that process (Torrez, 2004). One study found that while many Hispanic parents assumed high school counselors were making appropriate decisions regarding college preparation courses, most students were unable to meet the basic requirements for college eligibility (Torrez). Although the rate of Hispanic students admitted to public colleges and universities has increased, there remains a disparity between acceptance and retention rates for Hispanic students compared

to White students, further supporting the critical role adjustment may play in predicting college completion.

Literature Review

Previous research has found that non-cognitive variables are better predictors of college adjustment than cognitive variables (Martin, Swartz-Kulstad, & Madson, 1999), particularly for ethnic minorities (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). Yet, few studies have been replicated with Hispanic students. Valencia (1994) argues that more research is needed regarding the strategies that ensure the successful college adjustment of Hispanic students given that the variables that predict college adjustment for White students may not be as relevant for predicting adjustment among Hispanic students. Specifically, interactions may be embedded in a cultural context, thereby prompting the need to examine the unique ways personal and interpersonal factors assist in Hispanic students' college adjustment. We define personal factors as individual resources that students bring with them to the college environment and interpersonal factors as variables from which students can draw emotional and instrumental support (e.g., their parents). Therefore, we will be examining personal factors such as self-esteem, ethnic identity, acculturation, and interpersonal factors such as parental attachment and parental education as predictors of college adjustment.

Personal Factors

Identity formation is a critical developmental task during adolescence (Josselson, 1994). It involves the process of defining oneself as a group member within a broader social context and serves as the framework that provides individuals with a coherent sense of self or self-concept (Grotevant, 1992; Josselson). But how does one's self-concept relate to college adjustment, particularly for Hispanic students?

One aspect of an individual's self-concept is self-esteem, which some researchers have found to be related to college adjustment (Grant-Vallone et al., 2003-2004; Hickman, Toews, &

Andrews, 2001). In fact, previous research has found that self-esteem is one of the strongest predictors of college adjustment (Boulter, 2002). For example, Caplan, Henderson, Henderson, and Fleming (2002) found that self-esteem was a significant predictor of academic adjustment among early-entrance college students. However, little research has been conducted on the relationship between self-esteem and college adjustment among Hispanic students.

Perhaps a more salient component of self-concept for Hispanic students is ethnic identity. Ethnic identity is a critical component of an individual's self-concept and involves one's sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the degree to which his or her thinking, feelings, and behaviors are associated with that membership (Phinney, 1990). For Hispanic students, the meaningfulness of their ethnic group membership often develops within the framework that they are minorities in a White-dominant society. Yet, research finds that a stronger ethnic identity is positively related to college adjustment (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003).

While a positive sense of ethnic identity can facilitate college adjustment, an additional factor may be acculturation, the degree to which individuals adhere to mainstream and native cultures (Arellano & Padilla, 1996). Current research indicates that individuals can maintain strong ties with their ethnic group, while also becoming adept at surviving in the dominant culture (Saylor & Aries, 1999). Previous findings indicate that for Hispanic students, the transition to college is facilitated by a bicultural orientation, which involves both a strong affiliation with one's ethnic group and an ability to navigate within the dominant culture (Arellano & Padilla).

Interpersonal Factors

Researchers suggest considering the influence of interpersonal factors on college adjustment when examining the experiences of Hispanic students (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003; Torres, 2004). Such a consideration is relevant because, unlike Western cultures that stress the importance of independence, Hispanic

cultures place a strong emphasis on the continued identification with and attachment to family members into adulthood (Marín, 1993). Furthermore, it has been theorized that a secure attachment to one's parents can serve as a source of emotional support and a "base from which adolescents can explore their environment and adapt to college" (Kalsner & Pistole, p. 94). In support of this theory, Rice, FitzGerald, Whaley, and Gibbs (2001) found that parental attachment was positively related to college adjustment. Kalsner and Pistole also found that attachment was a significant predictor of college adjustment among Hispanic students.

While attachment to one's parents is important, it may not be the only predictor of college adjustment. Regardless of the attachment relationship, if parents lack college experience, it is possible that they may be unable to provide instrumental support while their children adjust to a new context. One may posit that an individual growing up in a family where parents have not attended college may have a very different understanding of the strategies required to successfully adjust to college than an individual who grows up in a family where at least one parent has attended college. In other words, without the benefit of personal experience, the parents may be less likely to prepare their child for transitioning to and navigating the college environment (Harrell & Forney, 2003; Riehl, 1994). In support of this assumption, Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) found that college students whose parents had not attended college reported lower levels of adjustment than students whose parents had some college experience.

Based on this literature review, it is clear that the research on college adjustment of Hispanic students warrants further study. To fill this gap, our study examined the unique contribution of personal and interpersonal factors in predicting college adjustment for this population. Previous research has found that adjustment is related to both personal and interpersonal factors, particularly for first-year college students (Martin et al., 1999) and may differ across various ethnic groups and cultures. Therefore, we targeted second-semester, first-year Hispanic

students to better understand how personal and interpersonal factors are related to the adjustment of students who have already successfully completed one semester in college. Specifically, the following research questions guided this study. First, to what extent do personal factors (i.e., self-esteem, acculturation, and ethnic identity) predict college adjustment during the first year of college? Second, to what extent do interpersonal factors (i.e., parental education and parental attachment) predict college adjustment during the first year of college? Third, how do these two clusters of variables differentially predict college adjustment during the first year of college?

Method

Participants and Procedures

The data used for this study came from a larger study that utilized an online survey to collect data from first-year students in their second semester at a four-year public university in central Texas. This institution is predominantly composed of White students; however, a primary goal of the university is to become a Hispanic Serving Institution (defined as at least 25% Hispanic enrollment). As a result, the university is in the process of increasing its efforts to recruit and retain Hispanic students. According to data obtained through the Office of Institutional Research (OIR), we were able to determine that the first-year class of 2004 included 473 Hispanic students, consisting of 269 females and 204 males.

OIR sent an e-mail to all first-year Hispanic students asking them to respond to an online survey. A total of 190 (40%) students responded, 135 female and 55 male students, with a mean age of 18.4. Regarding generational status, 8.9% were classified as first-generation (born outside of the U.S.), 28.4% were second-generation (U.S.-born, but at least one parent born outside of the U.S.), and 62.7% were at least third-generation (U.S.-born student and parents). Furthermore, only 28.9% of our sample were considered first-generation college students (i.e., their parents had

never attended college). In fact, 43.9% of the students' parents had earned at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 43.1% of the overall first-year Hispanic population at the university.

Measures

The following demographic information was obtained through OIR: (a) age, (b) gender, (c) parents' education level, and (d) generational status. To measure the potential impact of personal and interpersonal factors on college adjustment among first-year Hispanics, the following standardized instruments were used.

Self-esteem. The 10-item Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Inventory was used to assess students' self-esteem. The researchers selected this scale because it is the most widely used measure of self-esteem, it is highly reliable and valid, and it has been used with ethnically diverse populations. Responses ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (4). A sum of the responses was used in the analysis, with higher values indicative of a higher level of self-esteem. Cronbach's coefficient alpha was .87 for this sample, denoting a high degree of consistency.

Acculturation. Marín, Sabogal, Marín, and Otero-Sabogal's (1987) 12-item "Short Acculturation Scale for Hispanics" was used to measure acculturation, because it is a valid and reliable scale that can be used with Hispanic respondents of varied ethnic backgrounds. Responses were scored on a five-point Likert scale with higher values indicative of a higher level of acculturation. Cronbach's coefficient alpha was .90 for this sample, denoting a high degree of consistency.

Ethnic identity. To assess ethnic identity, the authors used Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, and Bámaca-Gómez's (2004) 17-item Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS). This measure consists of three subscales—exploration, resolution, and affirmation—scored on a four-point Likert scale ranging from "does not describe me at all" (1) to "describes me very well" (4). The EIS was utilized because it allows researchers to assess ethnic identity achievement without presupposing a positive sense of ethnic group membership.

However, for this analysis, all subscale items were combined to derive an overall ethnic identity score, with higher scores indicative of a greater sense of ethnic identity. Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the overall scale was .90 for this sample.

Parental attachment. The authors measured parental attachment using Kenny's (1987) 55-item Parental Attachment Questionnaire (PAQ). This questionnaire—designed to assess perceived parental support, understanding, respect, and facilitation of independence; interest in interaction with parents and affect toward parents during visits; help-seeking behavior in stressful situations; and satisfaction with help obtained (Kenny)—was selected for its psychometric properties and its appropriateness for measuring parental attachment across multiple ethnic groups, including Hispanics. Responses ranged from “not at all” (1) to “very much” (5). A sum of the responses was used in the analysis, with higher values indicative of greater parental attachment. Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the overall scale was .94 for this sample.

Adjustment. Adjustment to the overall college environment was assessed using Baker and Siryk's (1989) 67-item Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ). Designed for first-year college students, this measure has four subscales: (a) Academic, (b) Social, (c) Personal/Emotional, and (d) Goal Commitment/Institutional Adjustment. It is the most widely used, valid, and reliable measure of college adjustment. Items were scored on a nine-point Likert scale ranging from “does not apply to me at all” (1) to “applies very closely to me” (9). For this analysis, all subscale items were combined to derive an overall adjustment to college score. Cronbach's coefficient alpha was .94 for this sample, denoting a high degree of consistency.

Results

After examining the descriptive statistics (Table 1), a correlational analysis using Pearson correlations (Table 2) was conducted to determine relationships between the variables. Correlational analyses revealed that self-esteem, ethnic identity,

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for All Study Variables (N = 190)

Variables	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Acculturation	24.00	60.00	47.58	7.48
Ethnic identity	29.00	68.00	54.71	8.84
Self-esteem	14.00	40.00	31.16	1.44
Parental education	1.00	6.00	4.19	1.43
Parental attachment	109.00	255.00	207.50	28.41
College adjustment	267.00	564.00	406.91	68.31

and parental attachment were positively related to overall college adjustment. Collinearity diagnostics indicated that multicollinearity was not a concern in this analysis. We used a hierarchical regression model to determine the extent to which two clusters of independent variables were predictive of college adjustment among first-year Hispanics. The two clusters used in predicting adjustment to college were (a) students' personal characteristics and (b) interpersonal factors.

As demonstrated in Table 3, the first cluster, students' personal characteristics, contributed to a significant amount of the variance in adjustment to college ($F = 25.20, p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .45$). In addition, all three variables—self-esteem, acculturation, and ethnic identity—individually contributed to a significant

Table 2
Correlations for All Study Variables

Variables	Acculturation	Ethnic Identity	Self-Esteem	Parental Education	Parental Attachment	College Adjustment
Acculturation	1.00					
Ethnic identity	-.52***	1.00				
Self-esteem	.10	.14	1.00			
Parental education	.19*	-.16	-.03	1.00		
Parental attachment	-.18*	.13	.34***	.06	1.00	
College adjustment	.17	.24*	.58***	.13	.24*	1.00

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

Table 3
Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting College Adjustment

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Acculturation	2.30	0.89	0.23*	2.37	0.91	0.24*
Ethnic identity	2.04	0.70	0.27**	2.09	0.70	0.28**
Self-esteem	8.87	1.26	0.57***	8.27	1.38	0.54***
Parental education				4.14	3.95	0.08
Parental attachment				0.20	0.21	0.08
R^2				.47		
F				25.20***		15.49***

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

portion of the variance. Specifically, students reported greater adjustment to college if they had a higher self-esteem, were more acculturated, and had a stronger sense of their ethnic identity. The second cluster, interpersonal factors, was independently related to overall college adjustment ($F = 15.49, p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .45$), but it did not lead to a significant increase in variance explained. In addition, neither of the interpersonal factors contributed significantly to the variance in college adjustment.

Discussion

Consistent with previous research, the results of this study showed that personal characteristics were related to and predictive of college adjustment (i.e., Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Caplan et al., 2002). Specifically, self-esteem, acculturation, and ethnic identity were the strongest predictors of overall adjustment among Hispanic students. Regarding interpersonal factors, parental attachment was correlated with college adjustment. However, interpersonal factors did not contribute to a significant portion of the variance in adjustment over and above the personal characteristics.

These findings contribute to our understanding of the acculturation process as it relates to college adjustment (Arellano & Padilla, 1996). Specifically, our findings highlight the relationship between ethnic identity and acculturation by illustrating that students who are both acculturated *and* have a strong sense of their ethnic group membership are more adjusted to college. Similar to previous research, our findings indicate that students who are more adjusted to college are able to navigate the demands of this context and have explored their ethnic heritage and committed to the role it will play in their lives (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003). It is not our goal to imply that Hispanic culture is homogenous and that all Hispanic students will experience a similar pattern of adjustment. Rather, our findings affirm that a clear sense of one's ethnic group membership can serve as a psychological resource for students as they adjust to the demands of a new context. While it was beyond the scope of this study, future research should take

into account how ethnic identity may be defined and experienced differently across ethnic groups and consequently how it may differentially impact college adjustment.

Although interpersonal factors did not contribute to a significant portion of the variance in adjustment over and above personal characteristics, correlational analyses revealed that parental attachment was related to Hispanic college students' self-esteem and their competence in the values and practices of the dominant culture, thereby contributing indirectly to college adjustment. Methodologically, other measures of family influence, such as family cohesion, proximity to home, or frequency of family visits may have been better predictors of college adjustment for Hispanic students. Thus, future research should qualitatively examine the influence of interpersonal factors or include other interpersonal factors in the development of an instrument that more accurately measures Hispanic families' influence on college adjustment.

Furthermore, our findings contradict previous research which has found a relationship between parental education and college adjustment (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). However, our results should be interpreted with some caution as the parents of the students in our sample were highly educated and perhaps not representative of the Hispanic population as a whole. Moreover, because parental education was skewed toward higher levels, our sample may have lacked the variability necessary to find a statistically significant relationship between parental education and adjustment.

It is also possible that parental education is a greater factor in the process of applying to college rather than in the adjustment once a student enrolls in a postsecondary institution. For example, Choy, Horn, Nuñez, and Chen (2000) found that students whose parents had not attended college were less likely to make plans for college attendance while still in high school due in part to parents' unfamiliarity with the college preparation and application process. This is not to say that parental education is unimportant, but, rather, that it may play less of a role once a

student has transitioned into the college environment. Moreover, it is plausible that in families where parents have not attended college, siblings' college experiences may be better predictors of adjustment, thus future research should examine siblings' level of education.

This study makes a distinctive contribution to the literature because it is one of the few to examine personal and interpersonal factors in predicting college adjustment among first-year Hispanic students. However, the results of this study must be interpreted with some caution because of several methodological limitations. First, while our study contributed to the literature on "traditional" first-year college students and the impact of personal and interpersonal factors on college adjustment, there are an increasing number of nontraditional students who may be differentially impacted by such variables.

Moreover, because the sample was predominately U.S.-born Hispanics and the majority had at least one parent with some college experience, the results of this study may not be generalizable to immigrant students and those who are the first in their families to attend college. Given that our respondents were primarily later-generation Hispanics, it was beyond the scope of this project to examine the differential rates of enrollment in post-secondary education within the Hispanic population. Future research should more directly assess these differences. Further, it is possible that the unique university context influenced the academic success of our respondents. Specifically, given that 20% of both the study sample and the university population are Hispanic students, our respondents may have access to greater social support and academic resources than students attending a university with a smaller Hispanic population.

In addition, although our study was strengthened by the use of demographic information reported by OIR, we utilized students' self-reports of personal and interpersonal factors. Thus, our results may be limited by their perceptions as well as their willingness to provide truthful responses. Future research may want to include reports of other family members or peers.

Furthermore, those students who completed the questionnaire may have had different motivations for doing so than those who did not complete the questionnaire. For example, those who participated in our study may have been more adjusted to college or participated because of the potential monetary incentive. Another limitation was our use of the Short Acculturation Scale for Hispanics, a unidimensional measure that assesses only the adherence to the culture of origin. Future research should utilize bi-dimensional measures of acculturation that assess adherence to both the culture of origin and to the dominant culture. Last, because the data were correlational in nature, no causal interpretations can be made.

Implications

Although there are notable limitations in this study, the findings yield salient implications. As the demographics of the United States population change and the number of Hispanics in higher education increases, this study has implications for university policies and practices geared toward assisting Hispanic students. We believe universities should address the unique needs of Hispanic students during both the recruitment and retention processes. Specifically, a primary emphasis of institutions has been on recruitment. As a result, Hispanic college enrollment rates have increased. However, research continues to find that Hispanic students graduate at lower rates than White students. This disparity in graduation rates would suggest that in addition to recruitment, universities should consider ways to ensure Hispanic students' adjustment to the college environment once they enroll.

Specifically, the findings from this study can inform university personnel about the ways in which personal and interpersonal factors may be related to Hispanic students' college adjustment. For example, Hispanic students with a strong sense of ethnic identity adjust more easily to college. One step that universities could take to assist Hispanic students, particularly first-generation college students, in adjusting to the college

environment would be to provide opportunities for them to become involved in mentoring programs where they are paired with juniors and seniors, staff, and faculty.

Previous research supports the value of providing informal and formal support networks for Hispanic students on college campuses (Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Harrell & Forney, 2003). Such mentoring relationships can help students acculturate to college by providing supportive role models who can assist them in identifying and building on the strengths they bring to the college environment (Barajas & Pierce; Wallace, Abel, & Ropers-Huilman, 2000). Findings indicate that students who interact with university personnel feel more connected to the institution, a factor that can assist in the adjustment process (Wallace et al.).

Another possibility may be to encourage their involvement in ethnic organizations. Previous researchers have suggested that such opportunities build on the support provided by family members (Rosas & Hamrick, 2002). Furthermore, consistent with the idea that Hispanics place a strong emphasis on continued attachment to family (Marín, 1993), we found that parental attachment is positively related to adjustment. Specifically, parents can maintain this relationship with their children by providing instrumental support (e.g., accompanying them to university orientations) and emotional support (e.g., e-mailing and calling) (Mounts, 2004). In addition, universities can build on the positive influence of these continued attachments by involving Hispanic parents more in college life. This initiative could be accomplished through offering publications for parents that continue throughout the student's tenure at the institution, planning activities such as parent visitation weekends, or appointing a staff person who would assist Hispanic parents when they have questions about their children's college experience. Furthermore, it is important for universities to understand the heterogeneity within Hispanic families and incorporate knowledge of these cultural differences when developing programs (Torres, 2004).

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to explore the degree to which personal and interpersonal variables contributed to the college adjustment of second-semester, first-year Hispanic students attending a public university. Overall, our results suggest that personal variables, specifically self-esteem, ethnic identity, and acculturation, are stronger predictors of college adjustment than interpersonal variables, such as parental education and attachment. Nevertheless, our findings support the importance of family in the college adjustment process, yet more research is needed to determine which interpersonal variables may be stronger predictors of this process. Furthermore, these findings can guide university personnel in developing culturally sensitive policies and programs that will build on the strengths that Hispanic students bring with them to college.

Notes

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²We are using the term Hispanic, rather than Latino or Chicano, in order to more accurately reflect the terminology used by the federal and state government, our university, and the participants in our study.

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