

First-year students' loss experiences and institutional belongingness in the transition to college

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Abstract

Transitional experiences of first-year students are often described as losses; however, few studies offer measures to assess these loss domains. The purpose of this study was to identify domains of loss traditional-aged, first-year college students perceive in the transition to college and examine the relationship between these losses and their belongingness to the university. A total of 269 students, from a large Midwest university, participated in this study. The findings suggested students experience existential, friendship, and romantic losses in the transition to college. Of these domains, the existential and friendship losses were negatively associated with students' belongingness to the university.

Introduction

The transition to college is a formidable developmental period in a young person's life (Medalie, 1981). In order to help support the challenges of this transition, institutions have implemented First-Year programs that focus their attention on this transitional period and the success of students (Hunter, & Linder, 2005). The difficulties students face in the transition to college may contribute to the high rates of attrition from the first to second year. An aggregate of retention data for four-year institutions from 1983-2010 indicated that 30%-33.6% of students left college after the first year (ACT, 2010). The purpose of this study was to identify the domains of loss that traditional-aged (i.e., ages 18-22; Pascarella, & Terenzini, 2005), first-year college students perceive in the transition to college and to examine how those losses relate to their belongingness to the university.

Brief Literature Review

Retention and belongingness

- An aggregate of retention data for four-year institutions from 1983-2010 indicated that 30%-33.6% of students left college after the first year (ACT, 2010).
- Students leave college due to a lack of integration to the college campus (Tinto, 1975). The first-year is the most tenuous time to successfully integrate to the campus (Tinto, 2005).
- Belongingness is more inclusive of the marginality of some students and provides a more well-rounded concept of membership (Hurtado & Carter, 1997)

Transition to college

- The transition to college is a formidable developmental period in a young person's life (Medalie, 1981).
- Institutions have implemented First-Year programs that focus their attention on this transitional period and the success of students (Hunter, & Linder, 2005).
- Changes in the transition to college occur on multiple developmental domains including academic, social, and personal (e.g., identity, stress), and can be considered its own development period (Medalie, 1981).

- First-year students experience transitional challenges such as a decrease in friendship and social support (Brown & Christiansen, 1990; Gold, Neururer, & Miller, 2000; Ishler & Schreiber, 2002; Paul & Brier, 2001; Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007).
- Transitional experiences consist of gains and losses (Goodman, Scholssberg, & Anderson, 2006).

Loss

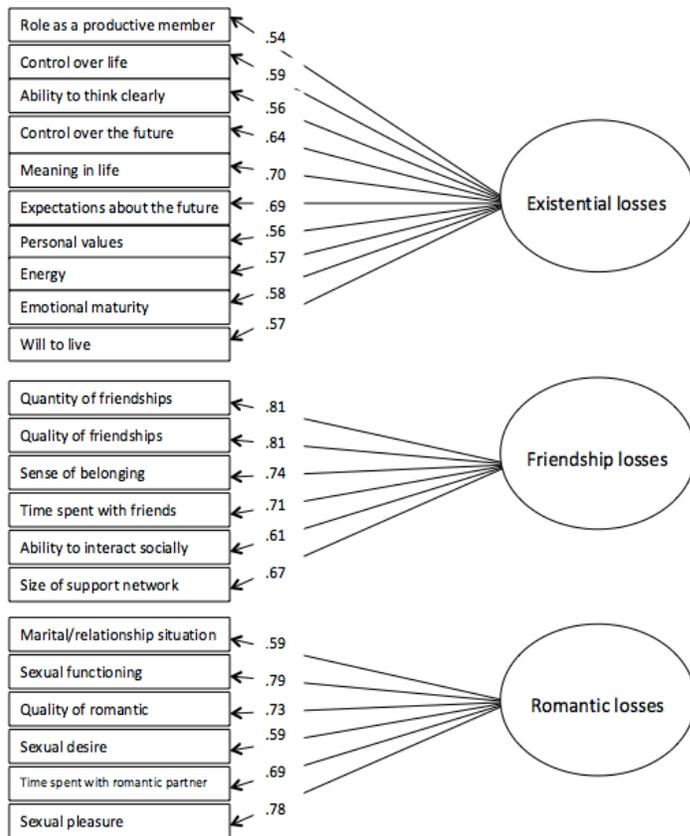
- Paraphrased from his earlier work, Harvey (2001) defines loss, “as a reduction in resources, whether tangible or intangible, that involves a significant emotional investment in the resources by the person(s) experiencing the loss,” (p. 840).
- Multiple losses can be perceived in relation to a single event (Harvey & Miller, 1998; Harvey & Weber, 1998; Goodman, Scholssberg, & Anderson, 2006), such as the transition to college.
- Research that has systematically defined the concept of loss has indicated that college students experience numerous non-death losses in similar domains, as well as domains of competence, self-respect, relationships, and academic expectations (Brown & Christiansen, 1990; Cohen, 1996; Cooley, Toray, & Roscoe, 2010; Gold, Miller, & Rotholz, 2001; Gold, Neururer, & Miller, 2000; LaGrand, 1985).

Research Design

First-year, traditional-aged students at a large, Midwest university were emailed a survey requesting their response to questions focused on perceived gains and losses associated with the transition to college and belongingness to the university. The Perceived Impact of Life Event Scale (PILES; Servaty-Seib, in press) is used to assess the multidimensional level of gains and losses one perceives in reaction to a particular life event. Participants are asked to respond on a continuum from 1 (extreme loss) to 7 (extreme gain). For the present purpose, participants indicated the extent of gains and losses, in a variety of life areas that they attributed to their transition to college. The PILES items were recoded so that higher scores signify more loss. An exploratory factor analysis was used to extract the loss domains students perceived in the transition to college. Existential, friendship, and romantic domains emerged. Belongingness was measured with the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM; Goodenow, 1993). The PSSM, initially normed on an adolescent population, was designed to assess students’ perceived levels of social acceptance and belonging to a school community. Pittman and Richmond (2007) made minor adaptations the PSSM to use it with university students, changing the language to reflect language used in academia (e.g., “professor” instead of “teacher”) and their version was used in the present study. A multiple regression was used to examine the relationships between these loss domains and students’ perceptions of belongingness to the university.

Research Findings

Three factors/domains of perceived losses in the transition to college emerged from exploratory factor analysis (EFA, using a maximum likelihood extraction using orthogonal varimax rotation) of the 80 items of the PILES: Existential (10 items), Friendship (6 items), and Romantic (6 items). Results from the EFA support the view that first-year students perceive parts of their transitional experience as losses, which is consistent with previous literature (Brown & Christiansen, 1990; Gold, Miller, & Rotholz, 2001; Gold, Neururer, & Miller, 2000; Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). Existential gains/losses (Existential) accounted for 19.32% of the variance. Friendship and social support gains/losses (Friendship) accounted for 14.85% of the variance. Romantic relationships and sexual functioning gains/losses (Romantic) accounted for



6.06% of the variance; however, this domain was not significant in the regression model. All were internally consistent ($\alpha = .89, .89, .85$ respectively).

Additionally, the regression findings indicated that the existential and friendship losses, but not romantic losses were significantly related to first-year students' perceived levels of belongingness to the university. The correlation matrix used for the multiple regression indicated slight significance ($r = .123, p = .045$) between dichotomous sex (i.e., male, female) and the dependent variable (i.e., belongingness); therefore, in step one of the regression analysis included sex. In step two, included the independent variables of loss: Existential, Friendship, and Romantic.

Correlation Table Between Sex, Race/Ethnicity, Loss Factors, and Belongingness

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Dichotomous Sex	—					
2. Dichotomous Race/Ethnicity	.17	—				
3. Existential losses	-.01	.02	—			
4. Friendship losses	-.12	.06	.55**	—		
5. Romantic losses	-.11	.13*	.31**	.30	—	
6. Belongingness	.12*	.00	-.56**	-.64**		—

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .001$

Summary of Variables Predicting Belongingness

Variable	B	SE B	β	$r_{a(b,c)}$
Step 1				
Dichotomous Sex	2.4	1.2	.12*	.12
Step 2				
Dichotomous Sex	1.3	.89	.07	.07
Existential	-.36	.06	-.31**	-.26
Friendship	-.62	.07	-.47**	-.38
Romantic Relationship	.06	.08	.04	.03

Note. $R^2 = .02$ for Step 1 ($p < .05$); $\Delta R^2 = .46$ for Step 2 ($p < .000$).

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .001$

Discussion

Loss domains

- The findings from this study supported the hypothesis that a friendship domain of the PILES would emerge with a college student sample. This result is consistent with literature on friendship loss and suggests the PILES is now a tool that can be used to quantitatively measure the extent of loss that students perceive in this life domain (Brown & Christiansen, 1990; Gold, Neururer, & Miller, 2000; LeGrand, 1985; Ishler & Schreiber, 2002; Paul & Brier, 2001; Servaty-Seib, in press).
- The current existential domain of loss is consistent in name with the existential domain Servaty-Seib (in press) found with an adult sample, however, the PILES items loaded differently onto this factor between samples. In the present college student sample, the existential loss domain included items such as, control over one's life and future, personal values, and emotional maturity. In addition, the items of energy and ability to think clearly loaded on this factor. These items initially appeared an odd fit for this factor; however, they make sense when considering the demands a first-year student may face in regard to scheduling and activities and the lack of control students might perceive when they lack the energy to think clearly. A sense of loss of control is consistent with the previous literature on college students' perceptions of lack of control and future expectations (Brown & Christiansen, 1990; Cooley, Toray, & Roscoe, 2010).
- The finding that students indicated romantic losses is consistent with LaGrand's (1985) findings that student's perceived a loss of relationships in transition to college.

Belonging and loss

- Friendship and existential domains of loss appeared to have the most impact on belongingness, whereas the romantic domain of loss did not significantly correlate with belongingness.
- It may be that students do not see their romantic relationships relating to how they belong to the campus, or that their relationships are long distance in nature.
- Friendship losses appear to contribute the most unique variance to students' perceived levels of belongingness to the campus; however, existential losses were also highly related to belongingness. This is consistent with the concept of belongingness and connection to the institution. If students are not feeling a connection to peers they may have a difficulty time connecting to the institution.

Implications

- Provides institutions information on how to best support the transition to college (e.g., addressing loss of friends, control).
- Knowing friendship and existential losses relate to first-year students' experiences of belonging to the campus may provide some insight into why high levels of students leave after the first year.
- Institutions can support these areas of transition by providing programming that address student's perceived lack of control and expectations for the future as well as building and maintaining friendships.
- Viewing these areas of concern from a gain/loss perspective allow for a fuller understanding of the experiences of and provide insight into how to address the challenges first-year students' face in the transition to college.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations

- Limited generalizability to more diverse students
 - Focus on traditional aged students
 - Homogeneity of the sample
 - Timing of study (second semester)

Future directions

- To conduct similar studies with different student populations
 - More diverse in regards to race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation
 - International students
 - First-generation students
 - Non-traditional students, veteran and military students
- PILES now normed on college student sample and can be used to measure perceived gains and losses to a variety of life experiences (e.g., death losses, injuries, divorce)

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****Note**** References listed are those used in this handout. For a full list of references or if you have any questions, please email me at karen.a.miller.1@purdue.edu.