

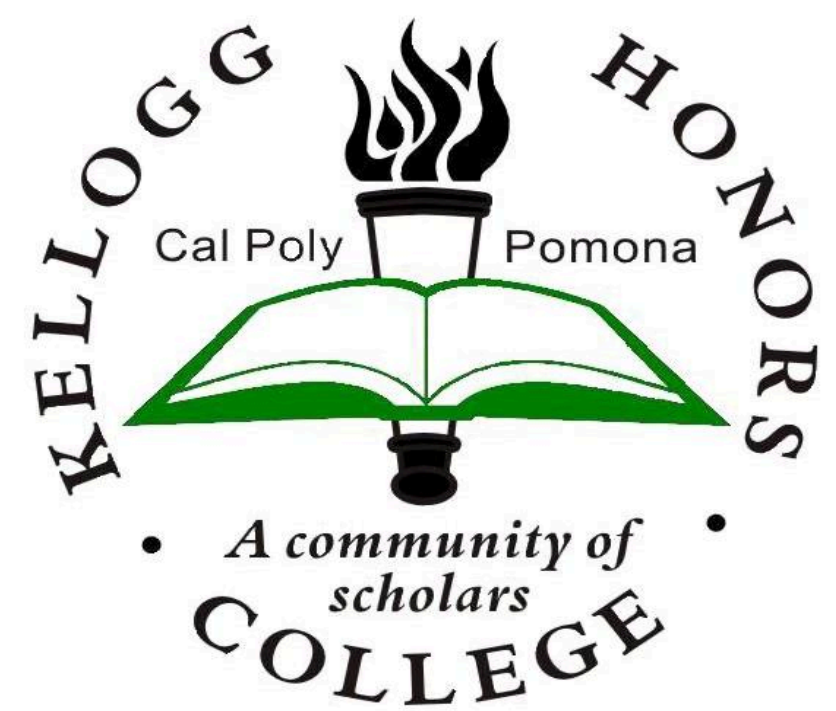
Occupational Stressors Among College Students:

Operationalization of the College Student Occupation

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Abstract

This project proposes the redefining of the college student paradigm. A large body of research investigates occupational stressors and strain. Through the operationalization of the college student as an occupation, a comparison is drawn to the standing literature about occupational stress and the experiences of college students at 2-year and 4-year institutions. The project uses an interdisciplinary approach to address the occupational strain college students face. Research was conducted from the fields of: Industrial/Organizational Psychology, Educational Psychology, Clinical Psychology, and Higher Education & Student Affairs research. Recommendations are made through the application of evidence-based practices in psychology and higher education & student affairs work.

Theoretical Framework

The study redefined the student from the “just a student” paradigm to reflect the role of a college student being an occupation. A neurolinguistics approach to the defining of an occupation as indicated by (Ellerin, 2015) suggests “*doing* as the essence of occupation, whereby *doing* is equated with *making*” where the actor (student) is participating in new or transformative processes. Role conflict and role ambiguity are key facets in stress research within I/O psychology. Higher Education & Student Affairs research indicates the role of the student is defined institutionally and by their own identity development (University of Texas at Dallas, 2005). The psychosocial development of the college student is correlated to identity resolution as defined by developmental psychologist Erik Erikson. The five elements of identity resolution being: experimentation with varied roles, experiencing choice, meaningful achievement, freedom from excessive anxiety, and introspection (Erikson, 1968; Erickson, Paul, Heider, & Gardner, 1959). From the field of Clinical Psychology, Abraham Maslow’s *Hierarchy of Needs* (1943) describes the basic needs of: Physiological, Security, Love, Esteem, Cognitive, Aesthetic, self-actualization, and transcendence. Thus, as part of the college student occupation basic needs include housing, food, transportation, campus safety, work (as needed), coursework, and extracurricular involvement. These basic needs are similar to the needs of professional occupations such as: workspace, parking, break room, trainings, and professional development. Further, akin to professional development from the I/O psychology perspective, Higher Education & Student Affairs research delves into *Student Development* and *Student Development Theory* and the application of development theories to students for “their change, growth, and development” (Strange, Banning, 2001). Student development theory in its evolution, addresses the biological, physiological, psychosocial, and environmental needs of the student (Evans, Forney, & GuidoDiBrito, 1998).

Making the Connection

As a student, one needs to complete assignments as assigned and pass tests throughout their academic career. In professional positions, individuals are expected to keep up with duties as assigned and pass performance evaluations throughout their job experience. Overall, the average student experience is ominously similar to that of professional occupations. A complexity of the student occupation is whether or not the student needs to work while being a student. For many students, working while being in college is a common experience. When defining the experience of a student as an occupation, there is similarity in time base with professional occupations. Students have the option of being part-time or full-time while in school. Thus, the student faces occupational stressors of scheduling and task management. Further, students are required to maintain their occupational development through regular training similar to other occupations. Regular training for a student would be the prescribed courses for their respective majors. The classes students take are a unique occupational stressor. In other occupations, provided training is generally provided by one or few trainers. Whereas, a college student must take classes (training) from a variety of colleges, subjects, and professors. In each course, the student must learn the expectations and style of each professor. Thus, an additional occupational stressor to college students is the course work (training). In addition to the mentioned stressors, college student type: New to College, Transfer Student, and Returning Student dictates unique stressors. The “New to College” student faces choosing a major, pre-professional additions, and environment adjustment. The “Transfer Student” faces different institutional culture & norms, transfer shock, and retroactive assessment of degree choice. The “returning student” and upper-division students face imposter syndrome, relevant involvement in the field (internships, work, research, extracurricular), competitiveness, degree completion, and time to completion.



Application

The study indicated specific recommendations to address the occupational stressors of college students. Scheduling is the first recommendation to alleviate strain on the college student, including prioritization, weighing demands, and utilization of a calendar or schedule. The second recommendation is utilization of academic advisors to address course load. Students should consider lower course loads until acclimated and increase course load with time. In regard to the stressor of different professors and classes, research indicates reframing and refocusing are effective in the development of coping mechanisms. Mentorship is a significant practice that when incorporated can reduce the strain for returning students, transfer shock, and career guidance. Utilization of the career centers on college campuses can assist in reducing the strain of relevant involvement, competitiveness, and graduate school planning.

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