

Understanding Psychological Distress, Job Satisfaction and Academic Performance in College Students

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Abstract

As the emphasis on higher education continues to be an increasing focus, the number of college students who work to get through school also continues to increase. While most college students choose to take on jobs in order to cover basic expenses, alleviate the financial burdens from their families, and gain experience, the balance between working and maintaining academic performance remains a challenge as noted by Tessema, Ready, and Astani (2014). The pressure felt by many to succeed academically while maintaining a certain quality of life is another source of distress for a population with an already continuous level of mounting pressures. The aim of the current study is to investigate levels of job satisfaction, assess academic performance, and evaluate distress levels in order to understand their effects on college students and their work environments, in order to gain insight into its relation to performance and achievement in a university setting. Information regarding demographics and academic performance was collected from Central Valley college students followed by a survey using the Generic Job Satisfaction Questionnaire and General Health Questionnaire, to determine levels of job satisfaction and distress. It was hypothesized that students with higher levels of job satisfaction would have higher levels of academic performance, measured using current grade point average (GPA), than students with lower levels of satisfaction, and that students with lower levels of distress would have higher GPAs than students with higher levels of distress. Additionally, it was predicted that students who had higher levels of job satisfaction would have lower levels of psychological distress compared to students who had lower levels of job satisfaction. By exploring these factors, much can be understood and utilized in order to improve workplace environments and academic programs for working college students.

Introduction

As the emphasis on higher education continues to be an increasing focus, the number of college students who work while attending school also continues to increase. As of 2011, the U.S. Census estimated that of the 19.7 million college students, approximately 70% held a working position outside of school. While most college students chose to take on jobs in order to cover basic expenses, alleviate the financial burdens of their families, and gain experience, the balance between working and maintaining academic performance remains a challenge (Tessema, Ready, & Astani, 2014). In addition to the stress of working and attending university, recent economic shifts have added to the already demanding pressures college students face. The current study examined students in California's Central Valley, where many are experiencing the

added stress of being a first generation college student. The aim of the study is to examine the inter-relations between levels of distress, job satisfaction, and academic performance in these students. Understanding of these topics within this population is not only beneficial to the population itself, but also to the universities who house them.

Psychological Distress

Much research has shown that college students are among the populations with the highest distress levels (Abouserie, 1994). Some of the stressors that students may encounter stem from current employment situations, social relationships, financial burdens, and most notably academic pressures. Research has indicated that distress related to academic performance remains the most dominant in

college life (Deroma, Leach, & Leverett, 2009). Regardless of economic situation or employment status, distress is an inevitable part of the college experience. Because increased distress can lead to the development of more severe psychological complications, it is recommended that college students learn to cope with high stress levels (Mangold, Veraza, Kinkier, & Kinney, 2007).

Job Satisfaction

The exploration of job satisfaction has received much consideration from both employers and researchers alike. Derived from the field of psychology, it is thought that the ability to establish achievement of basic aspects of life will also extend to other aspects of a person's life (Maslow, 1943). Interest in job satisfaction and research related to it has been heavily investigated in hopes of finding means to increase achievement and productivity in the workplace. Job satisfaction is defined as a positive emotional response toward various facets of one's job or experiences with the job (Locke, 1976). Most often associated with motivation and life satisfaction, understanding the level of job satisfaction in students can be beneficial in exploring academic performance. A recent study suggested that students who worked and felt satisfied with their job had better academic achievement (Tessema, et al., 2014).

Academic Performance

For all students, the goal of attending college is to attain academic achievement through adequate academic performance. While this goal remains the commonality for all students attending college, it is also a topic of interest for universities. Performance is generally thought of as a function of a one's internal motivations and physical and mental capacity (Nonis & Wright, 2003). It is well known that there are many factors that influence a student's performance regardless of their abilities or motivation. Recent research suggests that students often allot more time to activities other than academics, such as work and other non-academic interests (Greene & Maggs, 2015). Understanding the capacity for

performance is beneficial when attempting to address issues that hinder it and is also linked to other facets such as job performance and satisfaction (Green & Maggs, 2014).

Psychological Distress, Job Satisfaction, and Academic Performance in the Current Population

The student population in California's Central Valley is one that is unique. Many students in the population face challenges different in comparison to students at larger universities in more urban settings. Despite the challenges that may be related to economic conditions, socioeconomic status, or status as a first generation college student, an emphasis on education and attendance to local colleges continues to thrive. Although attendance and emphasis on higher education continues to increase, it could be said that this population may have distinct relations to factors of psychological distress, job satisfaction, and academic performance. Relations of these factors may be a result of personal obligations like work, family, and pressure to succeed.

In the current study, students at California State University, Stanislaus (CSUS) were the population of interest. According to the university's statistics, approximately 7,754 undergraduate students were enrolled in 2013, with the majority being full time students (California State University Stanislaus, 2015). Many students attending the university live off campus, with the majority being residents of Stanislaus County. Like most college students across the country, there is a large portion of students at CSUS who work while attending school.

It is understood that college students, regardless of region and economic situation, face high levels of distress stress; by looking at distress levels in students at CSUS, we can determine specific stress levels. With the large majority of working students, looking at employment status and job satisfaction can help identify extraneous stressors and determine if there is any relation to academic performance.

While there are many contributing factors influencing a student's ability to perform, looking beyond the classroom at characteristics like distress levels and job satisfaction may help both students and instructors create a more productive and successful learning environment tailored toward fostering better academic achievement. With regard to previous research three hypotheses were presented. First it was hypothesized that participants who had lower levels of psychological distress would have higher GPAs than participants who had higher levels of psychological distress. Second, it was hypothesized was that student participants who had higher levels of job satisfaction would have higher grade point averages (GPAs) than students who had lower levels of job satisfaction. Finally it was predicted that participants who had higher levels of job satisfaction would have lower levels of psychological distress compared to participants who had lower levels of job satisfaction.

Method

Participants and procedure

All participants were college students attending CSU Stanislaus. Participants in the study ranged from 18 to 60 years of age, with an average age of 24 ($SD = 8.17$). There was a total of 38 students consisting of 39.5% male students and 60.5% female students, with 84% identifying themselves as being either a junior or senior. All participants were recruited online, many were recruited from the Psychology Department's online subject pool via SONA. Participants were directed to the online survey hosted by Qualtrics. After agreeing to consent participants were asked to answer questions related to their demographics, psychological distress, and job satisfaction.

Measures

Demographic information

Participants were asked questions about demographic characteristics such as age (in years), sex/gender, class standing, enrollment status, current GPA, current employment status,

average hours worked, and field of employment. Of the 38 participants in survey 31 were considered full time students, with only 7 identifying as part time students. Additionally all but 8 of the 38 participants were employed. Of those who were employed, 12 reported working full time (30 hours or more) while 18 reported working part-time (less than 30 hours). Participants were employed in various fields including retail/sales (23.3%), food services/hospitality (20%), education (13.3%), clerical/office (13.3%), labor/agriculture (6.7%), and other (23.3%).

Psychological distress

Psychological distress was measured using the 12-item General Health Questionnaire developed by Goldberg (1978). Participants viewed statements such as, "Have you recently been feeling unhappy or depressed" and "Have you recently lost much sleep over worry". Responses were recorded using a 4-point scale (i.e. not at all, no more than usual, rather more than usual, more than usual) to respond to statements related to their current distress levels. High scores indicate severe distress, while low scores indicate low levels of distress. Participants in the study had an average distress score of 2.40 ($SD = 0.40$).

Job Satisfaction

Satisfaction was measured using the Generic Job Satisfaction Scale derived from Macdonald and MacIntyre (1997). The survey consisted of 10 questions. Participant responses were recorded using a 5-point Likert-scale (i.e. strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree). High scores on the scale indicate high satisfaction, while low scores indicate low levels of satisfaction. Participants had an average job satisfaction score of 3.43 ($SD = 0.74$).

Academic Performance

Participants were asked to self-report their current GPA and enrollment status. The sample of 38 had an average GPA of 3.27 ($SD = 0.43$).

Results

Pearson correlations were used to assess the relationships between job satisfaction, psychological distress, and GPA in college student participants in the survey. The hypothesis that participant's levels of distress would have an effect on GPA was found to be nonsignificant, $r(37) = -.09, p = .57$. The prediction that students job satisfaction was related to GPA was also found to be nonsignificant, $r(37) = .10, p = .55$. However, supporting the third hypothesis, there was negative relationship between stress and job satisfaction levels, $r(37) = -.44, p = .01$. As the distress levels of participants increased, levels of job satisfaction decreased (Figure 1).

Discussion

The current study attempted to assess the relationships between psychological distress, job satisfaction, and academic performance in college student. Using a measure to evaluate each of the factors, it was found that there was no relation between academic performance as measured by GPA, and either job satisfaction or psychological distress. However, a negative relationship between job satisfaction and levels of psychological distress was found. In participants who reported having higher levels of job satisfaction there was also lower levels of psychological distress. These findings are in accordance with previous research and help to support theories such the Humanistic view that states when people are able to achieve fulfillment in their work it can extend and benefit other aspects of life (Cotton, Dollad, & de Jonge, 2002; Maslow, 1943).

Limitations

Participation was exclusive to CSU Stanislaus, making any findings hard to generalize to college students on other campuses. The small sample size is also a concern when considering the limitations of the study. While the sample was fairly representative of the student population at CSUS, which includes about 65% female and 35% males (California State University Stanislaus, 2015), a much larger sample would be necessary in order to establish

the relationship of psychological distress, job satisfaction, and academic performance at a satisfactory level of power. Another shortcoming of the study was that GPA was self-reported. Self-report is not always accurate, due to social desirability effects, and could cause discrepancies when analyzing its relationship with other variables. Another shortcoming is that all responses were a reflection of distress and job satisfaction at the specific time of measurement. It may be that the variables fluctuate over time, so a more long-term measure of these variables (over a course of weeks or months) may yield more accurate results.

Implications

Exploring and understanding factors related with academic achievement, such as distress levels and job satisfaction levels is important in a university setting. In settings like CSUS, many students face the challenge of balancing the pressures of academics with economic situations, such as maintaining employment status and bringing in a steady income. Having an idea of what kind of stress student's face can help the university maintain a successful student population. Previous research has shown that the disconnect between students and university staff related to the student's life outside of school, such as a student's job, home life, and economic pressures, can produce students who underachieve in school in order to deal with non-academic pressures (Cotton, Dollard, & Jonge, 2002). Further research within this population can help instructors produce more successful students. For example, schools and teachers can help students deal with work-related pressure by offering more online classes, having classes that are offered at later times in the day, and providing resources to help students balance study load and stress. These tools can help increase student performance, achievement, enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. These compromises can also help in lowering dropout rates, while still producing well-adjusted students who can maintain a high level of academic success.

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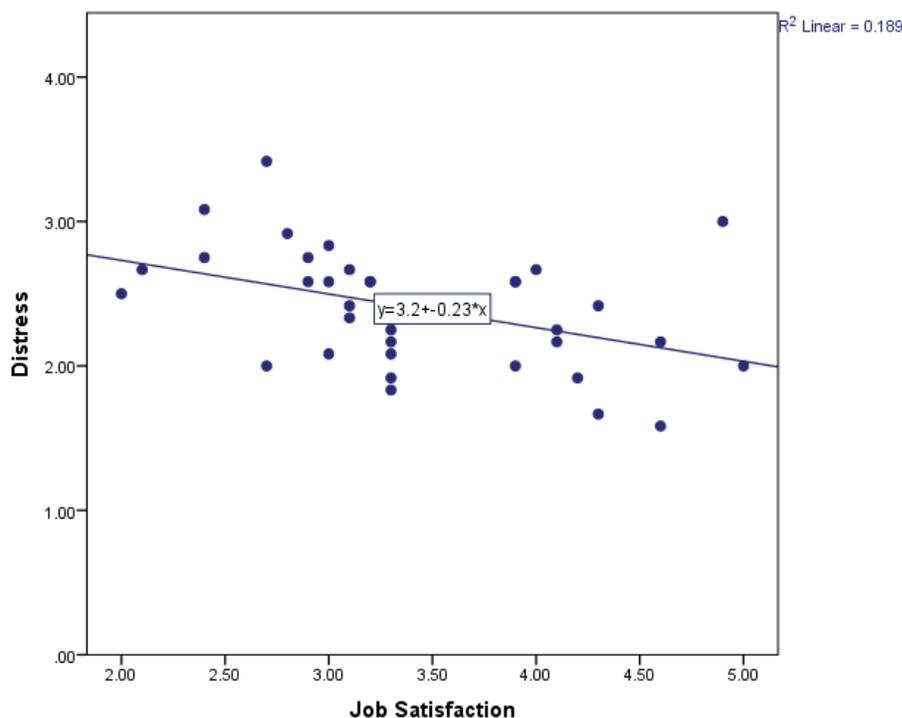


Figure 1. Relationship between levels of distress and job satisfaction in college students.