

**ABSTRACT**

**DISSERTATION:** PREDICTING FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE ACHIEVEMENT:  
EVALUATION OF A SELF-REGULATORY COPING MODEL

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The current trends observed in 4-year college graduation and retention rates (ACT 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014; Tinto, 2006) demonstrate a need for improvement in student academic achievement outcomes. Overwhelmingly, research finds that the first year in college is the time of greatest risk for student academic failure and drop out. Challenges associated with academic-oriented forms of stress and anxiety (Baillie & Fitzgerald, 2000; Bembenuddy, 2008; Cassady, 2010; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Jean, 2010; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Turner et al., 2012) coupled with limitations in effective coping strategies (Hofer et al., 1998; Kitsantas et al., 2008; McInerney, 2011; Pintrich & Zusho, 2002; Robbins et al., 2004; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2008) lie at the center of the difficulties these first-year students experience, which ultimately play a significant role in persistence and achievement outcomes. This is particularly true for students from at-risk populations (e.g., first-generation students, ethnic minorities; Balemian & Feng, 2013; Borman & Overman, 2004; Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007; Jones et al., 2010; Pascarella et al., 2004; Toldson, 2012). Postsecondary institutions continue to seek

answers through formal assessment and research investigations that may pave the way toward improving the achievement outcomes of their student population.

The wide body of research confirms that no single factor reliably predicts college academic success or failure, although institutions have traditionally relied upon indicators of prior achievement (i.e., H.S. GPA and college entrance exams) for such inferences (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013; DeBerard et al., 2004; Harackiewicz et al., 2002; Kowitlawakul et al., 2013; Randsell, 2001; Zypher et al., 2007). Rather, it is the collective of factors from environmental, behavioral and personal domains that interact and have the potential to positively or negatively influence college student achievement (Bandura, 1986; 1997; 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Snow et al., 1996). As such, the Transactional Stress and Coping model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) provides a comprehensive model through which the influence and interaction of multiple factors associated with student stress-appraisals, coping responses, and eventual outcomes can be examined within investigations of college academic achievement.

The main purpose of this study was to examine the degree of influence student background characteristics, indicators of prior achievement, anxiety-laden cognitive belief states, and self-regulated learning had on first-year college student achievement. Informed by the Lazarus and Folkman (1984) framework, a proposed academic-oriented stress-appraisal and coping model was tested for viability in predicting student achievement outcomes at the conclusion of their first-year in college. This study investigated research questions specifically associated with: 1) the influence of gender, ethnicity and first-generation status on first-year achievement; 2) the influence of student prior achievement (i.e., H. S. GPA and SAT scores) on first-year achievement; 3) the potential mediating influence of cognitive appraisals on first-year achievement; and 4) the potential moderating role of self-regulated learning in first-year

achievement. For this archival study, all student demographic data, measures of prior achievement, first-year college achievement (cumulative GPA) and self-report responses to the LASSI-HS (Weinstein & Palmer, 1990) instrument were accessed from a large sample ( $N = 29,431$ ) of first-time, first-year students enrolled at a mid-sized, Midwestern 4-year university during years 2004-2012. Using an established model of stress-appraisal and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) within an academic context, five models were tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to answer the specific research questions and investigate the utility of the models in predicting first-year college achievement.

The results revealed that although all background factors (i.e., gender, ethnicity, first-generation status) were statistically significant predictors of first-year achievement (GPA), their influence on first-year GPA was minimal. Additionally, prior achievement had a statistically significant, but weak, influence on first-year GPA. Although the direct path relationships for all pre-existing personal factors were statistically significant, the results also indicated anxious cognitive appraisals served a mediating role between these factors and first-year GPA. Thus, a partially mediated model best represented the relationships among these variables. The potential moderating effects of motivational regulation and active coping strategies did not have any meaningful impact in the two self-regulatory coping models tested. Although some statistically significant relationships were observed and provided evidence that background factors, prior achievement, anxious cognitive appraisals and self-regulated learning are associated, their influence was minimal and offered little practical utility in explaining first-year college student achievement.

Overall, the results of the study were unexpected given the strong theoretical and empirical support for the measures utilized in the study and literature supporting meaningful and

rather robust relationships among the variables of interest. This atypical finding seemed to be due primarily to the first-year student GPAs, and suggests attending to concerns related to the evaluation of student performance and achievement in the first year of college. Exploration of this pattern with additional performance and student typology data may guide institutional decision making related to student selection, program rigor, or evaluation practices. The implications of these results within the discussion of student success in higher education as well as directions for future research are also provided.