College Adjustment And Sense Of Belonging Of First-Year Students: A Comparison Of Learning Community And Traditional Students

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Purpose of Study

♦ To compare adjustment to college, academic achievement/attitudes, sense of belonging, and intention to persist of learning community and traditional (non-learning community) students.
♦ To obtain qualitative information regarding students’ experiences during their first year of college and their opinion towards the university.
♦ To ascertain if there is gender differences in adjustment to college, academic achievement/attitudes, sense of belonging, and intention to persist.

Relevant Literature

♦ Approximately one-quarter of all new college students, nationally, do not return for their sophomore year (ACT, 2003).
♦ This trend is present at Old Dominion University where approximately 24% of new students do not return for a second year.
♦ Learning Communities are one way to reduce the psychological size of a large university.
♦ Research (see Lenning & Ebbers, 1999 for an overview) has shown a variety of benefits of learning communities.
  o GPA, academic skills, self-esteem, satisfaction with the institution, greater engagement in learning.
♦ Learning community students have reported higher levels of sense of belonging (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002-2003) compared to traditional students.
**Hypotheses**

- Learning community students will have higher levels of sense of belonging, academic achievement and be more likely to intend to persist compared to traditional students.
- Learning community students will report more positive experiences during their first year and have a more positive opinion towards the university compared to traditional students.
- Gender differences and relationships between the above constructs will be explored.

**Participants**

- 960 First-Year students from Old Dominion University (ODU) were solicited for participation in the Summer of their first year.
- Each student was emailed a letter announcing the study. A letter was also mailed to their home address.
- 156 (16% response rate) students completed the online survey (hosted on Psychdata.net).
- 75 Learning Community students and 81 traditional students.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Community Students (N = 75)</th>
<th>Traditional Students (N = 81)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>Females</td>
<td>Females</td>
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<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>54</td>
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<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Males</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
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<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
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<td>35</td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>Minority</td>
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<td>40</td>
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<td>Living Arrangement</td>
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<td>With Parent(s)</td>
<td>With Parent(s)</td>
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<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>On Campus/On Own</td>
<td>On Campus/On Own</td>
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<td>46</td>
<td>49</td>
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**Measures**

- *Adjustment to College.* Adjustment to college was assessed using a variety of valid and reliable measures and additional questions on college experiences and attitudes. The Academic Attitude Scale (Wong, P.T.P.,
1998) measures student’s reasons for attending a university and their general attitude towards university education. It consists of six subscales: Intrinsic Value (“I find University education challenging”), Instrumental Value (“I will get more respect from others when I receive my university degree”), Personal Development (University education makes me more tolerant of different points of views”), External Pressure (“I attend ODU because I want to fulfill the expectations placed on me by my family or community”), Social Interest (“I am attracted by the social life offered at ODU”), and No Better Opinion (“I’m at ODU because I don’t have any other options”). Internal consistency of the scales for this study is as follows: Intrinsic Value ($\alpha = .71$), Instrumental Value ($\alpha = .81$), Personal Development ($\alpha = .83$), External Pressure ($\alpha = .61$), Social Interest ($\alpha = .51$), and No Better Opinion ($\alpha = .86$). Academic self-concept will be assessed using the Academic Self-Concept Scale (Reynolds, 1988). The Academic Self-Concept Scale assesses general academic facets of college students’ self-concept. Sample questions include: “Being a student is a very rewarding experience”, and “I feel capable of helping others with their class work”. The internal consistency of the scale is .94. Lastly, social self-concept will be measured using the Social Self-Concept Scale (Reynolds & Lyon, 1996). This scale assesses college students’ social self-concept. Sample questions include: “I feel confident when I am with a group of people I just met”, and I have an active social life”. It has high internal consistency ($\alpha = .96$).

**Academic Achievement.** Academic achievement was assessed using the following questions: cumulative grade point average (both self-report and university records), approximate number of classes missed each semester, and average number of hours spent studying in both semesters.

**Sense of Belonging.** Sense of Belonging (see SOBS section of survey) was assessed using the Sense of Belonging Scale (Hoffman et al., 2002-2003). The scale contains four subscales: Perceived Peer Support (“I met with classmates outside of class to study for an exam”), Perceived Classroom Comfort (“I felt comfortable asking questions in class”), Perceived Isolation (“It was difficult to meet other students in class”), and Perceived Faculty Support (“I felt comfortable asking a teacher for help if I did not understand course-related material”). The internal consistency of the subscales is as follows: Perceived Peer Support ($\alpha = .89$), Perceived Classroom Comfort ($\alpha = .92$), Perceived Isolation ($\alpha = .85$), and Perceived Faculty Support ($\alpha = .89$).

**Procedure**

- A web-based survey containing the above measures was created. This web-based survey was hosted on a secure website (PsychData.net). Participants who meet the eligibility requirements (i.e., Fall 2002 was first semester at ODU) were emailed a description of the study, their unique four-digit code, and the link to the
web survey. Participants were instructed that after completing the web-survey and submitting their responses they will be able to input their name and address if they want to be entered into the drawing to win one of 25 $20.00 cash prizes that will be raffled at various time points during the course of the study. After two-weeks non-respondents were emailed a reminder about the study and given the link to the web-based survey again. After four-weeks non-respondents were mailed a letter announcing the study to their home address.

Results

- **Learning Community versus Traditional Students (One-way MANOVAs and ANOVAs)**
  - No significant differences: sense of belonging, academic attitudes, GPA, intention to persist.
  - LC students felt more comfortable answering questions in class; felt that university education made them more tolerant of different points of view; spent more hours studying per week.
  - Traditional students perceived that other students performed better academically than they did.

- **Males versus Females (One-way MANOVAs and ANOVAs)**
  - Males reported more perceived isolation compared to Females.
  - Females reported more intrinsic value, personal development, external pressure compared to Males.
  - Females felt more comfortable seeking help from a faculty member, felt more motivated to succeed, attended class more, felt they learned more, were more pleased with their decision to attend ODU, and intended to persist more than Males.

- **Bivariate Correlations (N = 156)**
  - GPA was significantly related to: # of absences \((r = -.18)\), academic self-concept \((r = .21)\), and number of hours worked \((r = -.17)\).
  - Academic self-concept was significantly related to: classroom comfort \((r = .29)\), perceived isolation \((r = -.28)\), social self-concept \((r = .30)\), and GPA \((r = .21)\).
  - Intention to receive a degree was related to: perceived peer support \((r = .28)\), classroom comfort \((r = .20)\), perceived isolation \((r = -.24)\), perceived faculty support \((r = .24)\), academic self-concept \((r = .23)\), social self-concept \((r = .19)\), intrinsic value \((r = .33)\), instrumental value \((r = .45)\), and personal development \((r = .42)\).
Experiences During Their First Semester (Learning Community Students)

- “The first semester at ODU was a good learning experience. I learned how to contact my teachers if I had any problem, I knew what the teacher expected from me, and how to study for varies classes.”
- “I enjoyed my experiences at ODU. I became so active during my first semester that people couldn't believe I was a freshman. I enjoyed being active in many activities sponsored by the Student Activities Council.”
- “The first semester, I met a few students from the MAP program and that helped me stay on track and get an idea of what to expect the next few years.”
- “Honestly, my experience at ODU was awesome. Compared to high school, I thought college was a lot easier, but come to find out, it only get's tougher. As a freshmen in college, I was able to meet diverse, interesting people and I had the opportunity to be active in clubs and some social events.”

Experiences During Their First Semester (Traditional Students)

- “I would do it all over if I could. I know I could of performed better if I knew what I know now. I didn’t apply myself like I did in high school because a lot of the work was done outside the classroom. It was a heavy workload to do outside of class.”
- “My first semester was a shock, because I had to get used to the school-work, responsibility, and atmosphere. All along with the academic aspect, the social aspect was fun. I met a lot of people, made some good friends, and just felt accepted.”
- “It was challenging...much more studying. It was emotional and the social levels were like a roller coaster.”
- “My experiences were ok. I learned how grading in college would be and how to manage my time. I didn’t get the chance to meet too many people or be involved in any because I was trying to stay focused on classes.”

Conclusions

- Few significant differences found between learning community and traditional students.
- Significant gender differences found – Females reported less perceived isolation and more comfortable interacting with faculty members, attended class more, felt more motivated, felt they learned more, were more pleased with their decision to attend ODU, and intended to persist more than Males.
Intention to persist was significantly related to sense of belonging in the classroom, academic and social self-concept, and more positive academic attitudes.

Future Research

♦ A major limitation of this study was the low response rate (16%) – a larger sample is needed for more accurate conclusions.
♦ Researchers should assess the long-term impact of learning communities on intention to persist and academic achievement.
♦ Investigate what factors (e.g., sense of belonging, college stress) impact intention to persist in college students and ways to improve intention to persist.
♦ Explore demographic differences (e.g., gender, ethnic, age) in intention to persist and ways to reduce differences.

References


