

Student Adaptation to College Survey: The Role of Self-Compassion in College Adjustment

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ABSTRACT. The transition from high school to college can be a difficult adjustment for many students. Self-compassion, however, has been found to be associated with a range of positive psychosocial outcomes, and may also be associated with college adjustment. The goal of the present study was to examine the relationship between self-compassion and overall college adjustment. Fifty-seven female college students ($M = 19.20$ years, $SD = 1.05$) recruited from psychology classes participated in the study. Students completed the Self-Compassion Scale and Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire and responded to open-ended questions about their adjustment to college. Pearson's correlations revealed significant linear associations between total self-compassion and overall college adjustment, $r(57) = .28, p = .04$, and between various subscales of self-compassion and college adjustment. Multiple regression analysis found that first-generation and commuter student status significantly predicted mindfulness, measured as a component of self-compassion, $F(3, 52) = 3.47, p = .02, R^2 = .17$. Finally, hierarchical regression analysis indicated that, after controlling for student group status, higher levels of self-compassion were significantly associated with higher college adjustment scores, $F(4, 51) = 3.18, p = .02, R^2 = .20$. Analysis of the open-ended questions revealed 3 overarching themes regarding students' beliefs about college adjustment: (a) the importance of friends, (b) the importance of parental support, and (c) the importance of self-kindness. Overall, this study contributed to the understanding of college adjustment by looking at the role of self-compassion. Preliminary considerations for interventions and resources aimed at promoting self-compassion and improving college adjustment are discussed.

Keywords: self-compassion, college adjustment, students, college

The transition from high school to college is a major life event for many students and can be a difficult adjustment (American College Health Association, 2019). The American College Health Association (ACHA; 2019) found that stress was the leading factor affecting academic performance, endorsed by 36.5% of undergraduate students surveyed, followed by anxiety (29.5%), sleep difficulties (24.3%), and depression (21.6%). Similarly, Beiter et al. (2015) found that depression, anxiety, and stress levels were all positively correlated with life concerns such as academic performance, pressure to succeed, post-graduation plans, financial

concerns, quality of sleep, relationships with friends, relationship with family, overall health, body image, and self-esteem. The ACHA reported that college students endorsed the following factors as being difficult or traumatic to handle: academics (52.7%), career-related issues (29.0%), family problems (33.9%), intimate relationship (33.1%), and finances (37.8%). This all suggests that stress, anxiety, and depression related to multiple domains of life (i.e., academics, social, and personal) negatively affect the lives of college students.

One factor that has been found to be associated with a range of positive psychosocial outcomes,

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however, is self-compassion (Neff, 2003a; Neff, 2012; Terry et al., 2013). Self-compassion is a way of relating to oneself that involves being mindful, kind to oneself during times of distress, and aware that difficult feelings are a part of the human experience (Neff, 2003b). Increased self-compassion has been found to be associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety (Neff, 2012), as well as less rumination, perfectionism, and fear of failure (Neff, 2003a). Self-compassion has been found to be negatively correlated with homesickness and depression in incoming first-year students, and positively correlated with students' decisions to attend their university (Terry et al., 2013). Self-compassion has also been found to be a predictor of student well-being (Neely et al., 2009). The relationship between self-compassion and overall college adjustment encompassing multiple, broader factors of adjustment such as academic, social, and personal-emotional adjustment, and institutional attachment, however, has not been widely studied. As such, research on the role that self-compassion may play in college adjustment within and across these domains may be important for understanding students' experiences during this challenging transition.

While many students report difficulties adjusting to college, some groups of students have a more difficult time adjusting to college than others. Kroshus et al. (2021), found that, on average, first-year college students experienced an increase in depression and anxiety during their initial transition to college. Along with the increased stress, anxiety, and depression, it has been found that first-year college students are also more likely to experience symptoms of adjustment disorder (Rodgers & Tennison, 2009). Rodgers and Tennison (2009) found, in a sample of 426 first-year college students, that each of the six major symptom categories of adjustment disorder were reported at higher rates than would be expected in a community sample with emotional symptoms, sleep disturbances, and academic difficulties being endorsed by 47%, 38%, and 26% of students, respectively.

Another group of students who may experience challenges adjusting to college are first-generation college students. In a study looking at competition, anxiety, and depression in college students by student identity, Posselt and Lisbon (2016) found that, for first-generation college students, perceived competition in their classes was associated with a 5.9% point increase in the probability of screening for anxiety and a 7.2% point increase in the probability of screening for depression. Additionally,

it has been found that being a first-generation college student is associated with higher odds of experiencing chronic stress as a first-year student (Kroshus et al., 2021).

Reversely, some groups of students may have an easier time adjusting to college and are protected from negative college adjustment, such as commuter students. In a study looking at first-year nursing students, McDonald et al. (2018) found that those students who did not move away from their home community scored higher on academic adjustment to college than their peers who did relocate.

Regardless of specific group membership, research suggests that self-compassion plays an important role in the lives of college students. While a number of studies have examined the role of self-compassion in college students' well-being (Booker & Dunsmore, 2019; Kroshus et al., 2021; Terry et al., 2013; Neely et al., 2009), to our knowledge, the association between self-compassion and overall college adjustment has not been widely studied. Therefore, this study aimed to look at the relationship between self-compassion and overall college adjustment among students at a New England university by administering psychological measures of self-compassion and college adjustment. Additionally, we hoped to better understand students' own adjustment to college and how they coped with this major life transition by asking open-ended questions. Finally, we explored college students' adjustment based on their identification with certain groups (i.e., first-year student, first-generation student, commuter student).

It was hypothesized that self-compassion would be positively correlated with college adjustment so that higher levels of self-compassion would be related to higher scores of overall college adjustment, and lower levels of self-compassion would be related to lower scores of overall college adjustment. Additionally, it was expected that the positive subscales of self-compassion (i.e., mindfulness, self-kindness, common humanity) would be positively correlated with the four college adjustment subscales (i.e., academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, and institutional attachment), while negative subscales of self-compassion (i.e., self-judgement, over-identification, isolation) would be negatively correlated with the same four college adjustment subscales. It was also hypothesized that identification with certain student groups (i.e., first-year students, commuter students, first-generation college students) would predict adjustment to college

and self-compassion such that commuter student status would predict higher self-compassion and better college adjustment and first-year student or first-generation student status would predict lower self-compassion and worse college adjustment. Analysis of qualitative findings related to college adjustment and coping with difficult situations was expected to help better understand students' own adjustment to college and how they coped with this major life transition.

Method

Participants

Fifty-seven female college students ($M = 19.20$ years, $SD = 1.05$) in psychology classes at a primarily women's centered institution in New England participated in the study. Students were eligible to participate if they were enrolled in a psychology course that required research participation or provided optional extra credit through research participation. No student was excluded due to year in school or class standing. Participants were compensated one hour of course credit or extra credit for consenting to participate in the study. Of the 200 students informed about the opportunity to participate, 60 students signed up for the study and were granted credit. Two participants were excluded from data analysis due to significant missing data. A third participant was excluded because her age suggested that her experiences adjusting to college would differ from that of a traditional college-aged student. Most participants identified as White (77.2%), with the next largest ethnic group identifying as Asian/ Pacific Islander (15.8%). Participants' current class standing varied, with 36.8% of students reporting sophomore standing, 33.3% of students reporting first-semester first-year student standing, and 22.8% reporting junior standing. Finally, 21.1% of students identified as commuter students and 19.6% identified as first-generation college students (see Table 1 for all demographic data).

Materials and Procedure

Participants were recruited through in-class announcements in psychology classrooms requiring research participation or offering extra credit opportunities through research participation. During these announcements, students were informed of an optional research participation opportunity involving filling out a survey on student wellness. If students chose to participate, they signed up for the study online through the college's

research portal and were redirected to a Qualtrics survey. After consenting to the study, students were asked to fill out a measure of Self-Compassion (Neff, 2003a), the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (Baker & Siryk, 1989), and answer demographic questions and open-ended questions meant to further capture the college experience. The study was approved by the Simmons University institutional review board.

Self-Compassion

Self-compassion was measured using the 26-item Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003a). Responses are indicated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*) and scored into a full scale and six subscale scores (i.e., Self-Kindness, Self-Judgement, Common Humanity, Isolation, Mindfulness, and Over-Identified). Three of the subscales (i.e., Self-Kindness, Mindfulness, and Common-Humanity) address the positive components of self-compassion. As an example, higher scores on the Self-Kindness scale indicate a greater ability to be kind and understanding to oneself. The other three subscales (i.e., Self-Judgement, Over-Identified, and Isolation) address the opposing

TABLE 1		
Participant Characteristics		
Characteristics		
Ethnicity		
White/European American	44	77.2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	9	15.8%
Black/African American	4	7.0%
Latina	4	7.0%
Hispanic	2	3.5%
Other: Indian	1	1.8%
Class-Standing		
First-semester first-year	19	33.3%
Sophomore	21	36.8%
Junior	13	22.8%
Senior	3	5.3%
Other	1	1.8%
Student Group Membership		
Commuter student	12	21.1%
First-generation college student	11	19.6%
Age (years)		
<i>M:</i>	19.20	
<i>SD:</i>	1.05	

negative components of self-compassion. As an example, higher scores on the Self-Judgement subscale indicate higher levels of self-criticism. The total self-compassion score was calculated by reverse scoring negative subscale items and calculating mean scores. Internal reliability was high for total self-compassion ($\alpha = .91$) and reported reliability for this scale is high, $\alpha = .91$ (Leary et al., 2007). Subscale scores were calculated using mean scores. The Self-Kindness subscale consists of five items that assess one's ability to be kind and understanding toward oneself rather than harshly self-critical (Item 5: "I try to be loving towards myself when I'm feeling emotional pain"). The Self-Judgement subscale consists of five items that assess how harshly one criticizes oneself (Item 1: "I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies"). The Common Humanity subscale consists of four items that assess how well one views negative experiences as a normal part of the human condition (Item 3: "When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through"). The Isolation subscale consists of four items that assess isolative qualities (Item: 6: "When I fail at something that's important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure"). The Mindfulness subscale consists of four items that assess one's mindful acceptance or one's ability to hold painful thoughts and feelings in mindful awareness as opposed to over-identifying with them (Item 9: "When something upsets me I try to keep my emotions in balance"). The Over-Identified subscale consists of four items that assess over-identification with painful thoughts and feelings (Item 2: "When I'm feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong"). The current study's alpha coefficients for the SCS subscales were .84, .84, .79, .70, .70, and .70 for the six subscales reported above, respectively. These are similar to the alpha coefficients reported by the author of the scale (.78, .77, .80, .79, .75, and .81, respectively; Neff, 2003a).

College Adjustment

College adjustment was measured using the 67-item Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ; Baker & Siryk, 1989). Responses are indicated on a 9-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*applies very closely to me*) to 9 (*doesn't apply to me at all*) and scored into a full-scale score and four subscale scores (i.e., Academic Adjustment, Social Adjustment, Personal/Emotional Adjustment, Attachment). Internal reliability of the full scale was high ($\alpha = .93$). Reported reliability of the full scale is

high, $\alpha = .94$ for first semester students and $\alpha = .95$ for second semester students (Baker et al., 1985). It is recommended that the subscales of the SACQ be treated as separate constructs (Baker & Siryk, 1989). The Academic Adjustment subscale consists of 24 items that address the various educational demands of the college experience (Item 3: "I have been keeping up with my academic work" and Item 17: "I'm not working as hard as I should at my course work"). The Social Adjustment subscale consists of 20 items that refer to the interpersonal-societal demands of college, asking about participation in social activities and feelings of loneliness (Item 1: "I feel that I fit in well as part of the college environment"). The 15-item Personal-Emotional Adjustment subscale focuses on how the student is feeling psychologically and physically, with items pertaining to mood and health (Item 7: "Lately I have been feeling blue and moody a lot" and Item 55: "I have been feeling in good health lately"). Finally, the 15-item Attachment subscale explores how the student is feeling about the college they are attending and the bond between the student and the institution (Item 16: "I am pleased now about my decision to attend this college in particular"). The current study's alpha coefficients for the four SACQ subscales were .90, .86, .86, and .86, respectively. These are similar to the alpha coefficients reported by the author of the scale (.88, .91, .85, and .90, respectively; Baker et al., 1985).

Demographic Questions

Students were asked to fill out demographic questions relating to age, sex, race and ethnicity, major, and current class standing. Because the SACQ normative scores are determined by class standing, it was important to differentiate if participants were first-semester first-year students or if they had already completed a semester of college (Baker & Siryk, 1989).

Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions were used to further capture students' own college experiences and adjustment to college (see Table 2). All students were asked questions regarding college adjustment and self-help. Students were also prompted to describe their experiences further if they were commuter students, or first-generation college students.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS software version 25. Descriptive statistics of means and total scores were computed for the total scale and

subscales of both measures (see Table 3). Pearson’s correlation analyses were run for student groups status and both total scales and subscales for each measure (see Table 4). Multiple regression models were used to identify the best model of the criterion variables from the predictor variables (see Table 5). Finally, a hierarchical regression analysis was used to identify whether total self-compassion predicts overall college adjustment above and beyond student group identification.

Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed individually by three team members and recurring themes were discussed in group meetings. Through discussion, three main themes emerged from the qualitative data. There were no discrepancies.

Results

Quantitative Data

Data was collected from October 4 through October 18 to capture students’ experiences during the midterm period. It has been suggested that measures of academic adjustment be conducted in the first 6 weeks of the semester so students are less likely to imagine that future semesters will be less difficult (Terry et al., 2013). Three responses from the SACQ were missing from three different participants and were replaced using the guidelines for missing data laid out in the SACQ manual (Baker

& Siryk, 1989), to use the mean response for the subscale score the item belongs to. Analysis focused on participants’ mean and sum scores on the SCS and the SACQ. Descriptive statistics for both scales can be found in Table 3. Descriptive statistics were also computed for four groups of students: those who were in their first semester at college (first-year students), those who were not in their first semester at college (not first-year students), those who identified as commuter students, and those who identified as first-generation college students.

Pearson’s correlation coefficients were

TABLE 2	
Open-Ended Questions	
What was it like adjusting to life in college?	
What was most helpful to you as you adjusted to college?	
If you are a Simmons University varsity athlete, how has being an athlete influenced your adjustment to Simmons?	
If you are a nursing major, how has being a nursing major influenced your adjustment to Simmons?	
If you are a commuter student how has being a commuter student influenced your adjustment to Simmons?	
If you are a first-generation college student, how has being a first-generation college student influenced your adjustment to Simmons?	
Describe what self-help means to you.	
What do you do to relax after a difficult or stressful day?	
What advice would you offer to a new student to help her/him/them adjust to college?	

TABLE 3						
Descriptive Statistics (Ms and SDs) of Total Sample and Subsamples						
Scale	Total Sample	First-Year Students (n = 19)	Non-First-Year Students (n = 38)	First-Generation College Students (n = 11)	Commuter Students (n = 12)	
SACQ full scale	381.93 (72.03)	396.47 (65.53)	374.65 (74.83)	345.36 (76.96)	348.92 (81.55)	
SACQ Academic Adjustment	142.05 (30.81)	147.53 (28.21)	139.32 (32.04)	128.36 (35.38)	126.58 (31.63)	
SACQ Social Adjustment	114.49 (27.64)	117.95 (29.34)	112.76 (26.99)	105.18 (30.24)	101.42 (21.59)	
SACQ Personal-Emotional Adjustment	68.82 (22.51)	74.37 (17.60)	66.05 (24.34)	58.55 (19.43)	69.25 (28.03)	
SACQ Attachment	94.74 (21.43)	99.68 (25.68)	92.26 (18.84)	86.64 (22.51)	81.00 (17.01)	
SCS full scale	2.61 (0.59)	2.57 (0.41)	2.64 (0.67)	2.54 (0.49)	2.89 (0.48)	
SCS Mindfulness	2.92 (0.74)	2.78 (0.66)	2.99 (0.77)	2.59 (0.55)	3.29 (0.45)	
SCS Common Humanity	2.87 (0.85)	2.92 (0.83)	2.85 (0.87)	2.82 (0.93)	3.02 (0.61)	
SCS Self-Kindness	2.71 (0.79)	2.74 (0.72)	2.69 (0.84)	2.58 (0.84)	3.13 (0.72)	
SCS Isolation	3.46 (0.84)	3.63 (0.79)	3.37 (0.86)	3.39 (1.00)	3.17 (0.97)	
SCS Over-Identified	3.82 (0.70)	3.89 (0.57)	3.78 (0.76)	3.86 (0.66)	3.60 (0.73)	
SCS Self-Judgement	3.53 (0.84)	3.53 (0.75)	3.54 (0.89)	3.53 (0.89)	3.35 (0.72)	

Note. SACQ = Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire; SCS = Self-Compassion Scale. The max score on the SACQ full scale is 603 with max scores on the subscales as follows, academic adjustment (216), Social Adjustment (180), Personal-Emotional Adjustment (135), and Attachment (135). Higher scores indicate better college adjustment. The max mean score on the SCS full scale and subscales is five. Higher scores indicate a greater degree of self-compassion or of each subscale trait.

TABLE 4

Student Group, Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire, and Self-Compassion Scale Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. SACQ total	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
2. SACQ Academic Adjustment	.82**	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
3. SACQ Social Adjustment	.78**	.37**	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
4. SACQ Personal-Emotional Adjustment	.76**	.57**	.42**	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
5. SACQ Attachment	.82**	.51**	.88**	.41**	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
6. Commuter student status	.24	.26*	.25	–.01	.33*	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
7. First-generation student status	.25	.23	.16	.23	.18	.29*	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
8. First-year status	.14	.13	.09	.18	.17	.37**	–.05	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
9. SCS total	.28*	.11	.21	.40**	.16	–.24	.07	–.05	1	–	–	–	–	–	–
10. SCS Self-Kindness	.23	.03	.20	.38**	.17	–.28*	.08	.03	.84**	1	–	–	–	–	–
11. SCS Mindfulness	.14	.10	.07	.23	–.01	–.27*	.22	–.14	.77**	.74**	1	–	–	–	–
12. SCS Common Humanity	.11	–.01	.18	.11	.12	–.09	.03	.04	.60**	.57**	.59**	1	–	–	–
13. SCS Self-Judgement	–.31*	–.16	–.20	–.44**	–.20	.11	.001	–.006	–.80**	–.54**	–.38**	–.21	1	–	–
14. SCS Isolation	–.28*	–.17	–.19	–.31*	–.17	.18	.04	.15	–.71**	–.40**	–.35**	–.14	.68**	1	–
20. SCS Over-Identified	–.12	–.01	–.06	–.29*	–.03	.16	–.03	.08	–.71**	–.44**	–.43**	–.18	.62**	.56**	1

Note. SACQ = Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire, SCS = Self Compassion Scale, Commuter Student Status (0 = Yes, commuter student, 1 = No, not a commuter student), First-Generation Status (0 = Yes, first-generation student, 1 = No, not a first-generation Student), First-Year Status (0 = No, not a first-year, 1 = Yes, first-year).
p* < .05. *p* < .01.

TABLE 5

Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting College Adjustment and Self-Compassion

Dependent Variable	First-Year Student		Commuter Student		First-Generation Student		F	R ²
	b	t	b	t	b	t		
SACQ total	14.51	0.66	24.65	0.94	38.18	1.51	1.89	.10
SACQ Academic Adjustment	5.55	0.59	14.02	1.26	13.52	1.26	1.96	.10
SACQ Social Adjustment	–1.20	–0.14	14.44	1.44	6.30	0.65	1.21	.07
SACQ Personal-Emotional Adjustment	12.61	1.85	–10.31	–1.27	16.58	2.12*	2.26	.12
SACQ Attachment	1.56	0.24	14.73	1.94	5.08	0.70	2.27	.12
SCS total	0.09	0.47	–0.45	–2.07	0.24	1.14	1.56	.08
SCS Mindfulness	0.02	0.09	–0.65	–2.53*	0.61	2.44*	3.46*	.17
SCS Self-Kindness	0.30	1.26	–0.78	–2.75**	0.40	1.48	2.67	.13
SCS Common Humanity	0.17	0.63	–0.31	–0.95	0.17	0.53	0.34	.02
SCS Self-Judgement	–0.13	–0.47	0.31	0.96	–0.10	–0.31	0.31	.02
SCS Isolation	0.16	0.62	0.30	0.93	0.00	0.00	0.69	.04
SCS Over-Identified	0.00	0.01	0.31	1.18	–0.15	–0.59	0.57	.03

Note. SACQ = Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire, SCS = Self-Compassion Scale
p* < .05. *p* < .01.

between total self-compassion and overall college adjustment, $r(57) = .28, p = .04$. Additionally, total self-compassion was linearly associated with the personal-emotional adjustment subscale of the SACQ, $r(57) = .40, p = .002$. Overall college adjustment also showed a significant negative linear association with the self-judgement subscale of the SCS, $r(57) = -.31, p = .02$, and the isolation subscale of the SCS, $r(57) = -.28, p = .03$. Results also indicated significant correlations between the personal-emotional adjustment subscale of the SACQ and four subscales of the SCS. There was a significant positive linear association between the personal-emotional adjustment subscale of the SACQ and the self-kindness subscale of the SCS, $r(57) = .38, p = .004$. Finally, there was a significant negative linear association between the personal-emotional adjustment subscale of the SACQ and the isolation subscale of the SCS, $r(57) = -.31, p = .02$, the self-judgment subscale of the SCS, $r(57) = -.44, p = .001$, and the over-identified subscale of the SCS, $r(57) = -.29, p = .03$.

Correlations were also run to determine any association between student group status and both self-compassion and college adjustment. There was a significant negative association between commuter student status and mindfulness, $r(57) = -.27, p = .05$, and self-kindness, $r(57) = -.28, p =$

calculated to determine linear associations between self-compassion and college adjustment (see Table 4). There was a significant positive linear association

.04. Commuter student status was also significantly positively associated with the SACQ academic adjustment, $r(57) = .26, p = .05$, and attachment, $r(57) = .33, p = .01$, subscales.

Multiple regressions were conducted to investigate the best prediction of total college adjustment, academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal/emotional adjustment, attachment, total self-compassion, mindfulness, self-kindness, common humanity, self-judgement, isolation, and over-identification from first-year status, commuter-student status, and first-generation status (see Table 5). Results of the multiple regression model to test if commuter-student status, first-generation status, and first-year status predicted mindfulness indicated that the model explained a significant amount of the variance in mindfulness, $F(3, 52) = 3.47, p = .02, R^2 = .17$. Both commuter-student status ($b = -0.65, t = -2.53, p = .01$) and first-generation student status ($b = 0.61, t = 2.44, p = .02$) contributed significantly to the model, however, first-year status did not contribute to the model ($b = 0.02, t = .09, p = .93$).

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to investigate whether total self-compassion predicts total college adjustment above and beyond student group membership. Commuter student, first-generation student, and first-year student status were all entered at step one and self-compassion was entered at step two. The results of step one indicated that commuter student status, first-generation student status, and first-year status accounted for the 9.8% of the variance (R^2) in total college adjustment and was not significant, $F(3, 52) = 1.89, p = .14$. When self-compassion was added in step two, however, the model accounted for 20% of the variance (R^2) in total college adjustment ($\Delta R^2 = .10$) and was significant, $F(4, 51) = 3.18, p = .02$, $\Delta F = 6.45, p = .01$. Specifically, after accounting for student group status, self-compassion predicted college adjustment such that higher levels of self-compassion were associated with higher college adjustment scores, ($b = 40.40, t = 2.54, p = .01$).

Qualitative Data

To gain a further understanding of college adjustment, qualitative data was analyzed from open-ended questions. Fifty-seven participants responded to the qualitative questions and were included in the analysis. After thematic analysis by three lab members, three overarching themes emerged related to students' own adjustment to college and how they coped with this major life transition: (a) the importance of friends, endorsed by 44% of

students, (b) the importance of parental support, endorsed by 23% of students, (c) the importance of self-kindness, endorsed by 32% of students.

The Importance of Friends

Just over half of participants noted that social support from college friends was important to their adjustment to college. One student commented on how her friends allowed her to break out of her shell: "Definitely finding a group of friends that I could confide in—they make me know I'm not alone and they're able to break me out of my shell."

Another commented on how her friends eased her transition to college: "Finding and having friends who I can spend time and de-stress with has been most helpful in my transition. I think my transition would have been a lot worse if I had not found people to be close to."

It was also noted that a lack of friends or social support could make the adjustment to college more difficult. One student mentioned how, as the years went on, she seemed to have fewer friends and it resulted in more stress in her personal life:

Adjusting was easy for me. my [*sic*] first semester freshman year I did very well and had lots of friends. As the years have gone on, I find myself with less friends and not doing quite as well as freshman year. I am still doing well academically, but very stressed with academics and also personal life.

Lack of social support from friends also emerged when asking commuter students about their experiences adjusting to college. About half of the commuter students endorsed that being a commuter student made it harder to connect to the student body and make friends. Because commuter students spend less time on campus and have fewer interactions with other students, it can make building a social support system difficult. One student commented on how commuting makes her feel less connected to the college campus: "Being a commuter student has made my adjustment to Simmons University more difficult. I feel like I can't connect well with other students who live on campus." Another commuter student mentioned how she tends to isolate herself more, making it harder to make friends: "It has made it more difficult for me to make friends and I tend to isolate more."

These quotes reflect the importance of social support through friends in a student's adjustment to college. They also demonstrate how a lack of

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support from friends can lead to feelings of isolation from the rest of the student body.

The Importance of Parental Support

Along with social support from friends, emotional support from parents also aided in the college adjustment process for many students. When asked what made the adjustment process easier, some students mentioned contact with family: “having a very supportive family,” “keeping in touch with parents,” and “my family keeping in close contact.”

Although keeping in contact with family was often mentioned as making adjustment easier, being away from family made the adjustment to college difficult for some students. One student mentioned that, because she has always spent a lot of time at home, being away from home made her adjustment to college more challenging: “It has been very hard for me lately as I am a homebody, and my family members are very special to me so I’m used to having people to hang out with all the time.”

Another student mentioned how being an international student made her adjustment difficult because her family was so far away: “It’s hard. I’m an international student and my family is very far away, and everything here is very foreign to me. Some days it’s easier, and some days it’s harder.”

Although most students who described the importance of family support mentioned emotional support, over half of first-generation students described a lack of informational family support around how to navigate college. One student mentioned how her family’s lack of understanding the pressures she is under at school made her adjustment to college more difficult:

It’s very difficult because I have no guidance from my family and they have no understanding of my stresses and course work. I’m always tired and overworked because I’m paying for college myself and Simmons University is not very supportive of working students and the expenses are out of control.

Another student mentioned that she feels like she cannot turn to her family for help during stressful times because she will be viewed as ungrateful for her college education:

Freshman year was very hard for me. I couldn’t talk to my parents about things because any minor frustration I would speak about they would see me

as ungrateful and tell me to focus on my studies. However I dont [*sic*] know what I want to do and I cant [*sic*] talk to them about that. I cant [*sic*] talk to anyone in my family because we are all going to college for the first time together.

From these quotes, it is clear family plays an important role in a student’s adjustment to college. Reaching out to a supportive family member was helpful for many students yet being away from family made adjustment more difficult. The experiences of first-generation college students also indicated that a lack of guidance from parents made adjustment for these students more difficult.

Importance of Self-Kindness

Finally, students also mentioned the importance of self-kindness when dealing with the stressors of college. Using different self-care techniques helped students through difficult periods. Many of these techniques were self-focused. For example, many students mentioned how they will watch TV or do leisure activities they enjoy: “I meditate and try to relax at home,” “I do art or work in my bullet journal or I watch Netflix,” “read, make and listen to music, watch TV, knit, exercise,” and “after a stressful day I typically like to clear my head and spend time outside maybe going for a walk and listening to some music or writing in my journal to get out how I am feeling.”

When asked what self-help means, recognizing one needs to take the time to do these self-focused, de-stressing activities was often mentioned. One student commented how self-help is doing what is best for you: “I believe self-help is taking time to yourself to relax and do what is best for you when you are having a difficult time.”

Other self-care techniques included reaching out to the social support systems identified as important to college adjustment in the above themes. One student commented that, although she takes time to herself to de-stress, she also enjoys talking to friends and family as a way to unwind: “After a difficult or stressful day I usually try to eat a good dinner and take a break from work by watching a movie or hanging out with my friends and calling my parents.”

When asked what advice one would offer to a new student to help with their adjustment, self-kindness was often recommended. One student advised a new student to remember that they are not alone and that there are other students going through the same things they are:

Everyone reacts to college in their own ways, you're not alone if you're having a rough time. Be kind to yourself and do little things that make you happy. Make a routine and stick to it. Explore the city. Eat some good food (don't restrict yourself to [the dining hall])

Another student mentioned that new students should take it easy on themselves and that adjustment takes time: "I would suggest being easy on yourself, and not expecting to have every aspect of your new life in college perfectly pulled together within the first few months."

The importance of self-kindness is demonstrated through these quotes as students explained how they cope with the stressful aspects of college and what they would advise new students to do during their adjustment. Self-kindness is described as realizing when one needs to relax and taking the time to do self-focused activities or reach out to support systems.

Discussion

Adjusting to life in college can be challenging academically, socially, and emotionally. Because college is a time of change in the lives of students, it can also be a time of increased stress, depression, and anxiety. The goal of the present study was to examine whether aspects of self-compassion, which have been found to be associated with decreased stress (Neely et al., 2009), would be associated with students' adjustment to college.

Our first hypothesis that self-compassion would be positively correlated with college adjustment was supported through our correlation analysis. Self-compassion and overall college adjustment were positively correlated, suggesting that students who have higher self-compassion scores also have higher adjustment to college scores. Additionally, the results of the hierarchical regression analysis indicated that after adjusting for student group status, self-compassion still significantly predicted overall college adjustment in that higher levels of self-compassion were associated with higher overall college adjustment scores. This finding suggests that above and beyond student group status, self-compassion still significantly predicts college adjustment. In our qualitative themes, we found that self-kindness (a component of self-compassion) in times of stress was expressed as very important to help cope with the stresses of college. Self-compassion has been similarly found

to be associated with satisfaction with social life, academic life, and a student's decision to attend college in a sample of first-year students (Terry et al., 2013). Reversely, overall college adjustment was negatively correlated with isolation and self-judgement, suggesting that students who isolate and judge themselves more are less well adjusted to college. This was also reflected in the qualitative findings in that spending time with friends and staying connected with families was very important to college adjustment. One student even mentioned how, as she lost some of her friends throughout her years at school, she felt more stressed than when she had more friends during her first year. Similarly, Terry et al. (2013) found that students who scored lower in self-compassion and disliked their social lives experienced greater homesickness and were overall less satisfied with their decision to attend their university.

Our second hypothesis that positive subscales of self-compassion would be positively correlated with the four college adjustment subscales, while negative subscales of self-compassion would be negatively correlated with the same four college adjustment subscales, was partially supported. Self-compassion was positively correlated with personal-emotional adjustment, suggesting that students who are more self-compassionate are adjusting better psychologically and physically. Although the design of our study did not allow us to determine causality, in other studies, self-compassion has been found to predict student well-being (Booker & Dunsmore, 2019; Neely et al., 2009; Terry et al., 2013). In a study of first-year undergraduate students, self-compassion was found to be negatively associated with depression and anxiety (Terry et al., 2013). Self-compassion was also found to predict lower depression and anxiety scores in first-year undergraduate students and higher levels of thriving (Kroshus et al., 2021).

In our study, personal-emotional adjustment was also positively correlated with self-kindness, suggesting that students who are kinder to themselves are better adjusted personally and emotionally. This was reflected in the qualitative responses in that self-kindness techniques were expressed as very important to college adjustment. Learning to practice self-kindness was also suggested as advice for incoming students. One student encouraged incoming first-year students to take it easy on themselves as they adjust to their new lives. Reversely, personal-emotional adjustment was negatively correlated with isolation, self-judgement,

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and over-identification, suggesting that students who isolate, self-judge, and over-identify with painful thoughts struggle more psychologically and physically. Similar results have been found when looking at the role of self-compassion with student well-being. Booker and Dunsmore (2019) found that in a group of incoming college first-year students and a group of undergraduate students in all class standings, after controlling for covariates (age, sex, transfer student status, and study cohort), self-compassion was positively associated with gratitude, positive affect, subjective happiness, and life satisfaction. As expected, self-compassion was also negatively associated with negative affect.

The third and final hypothesis that identification with certain student groups would predict adjustment to college and self-compassion was also partially supported. Commuter student status was positively correlated with academic adjustment and attachment to the institution such that commuter students exhibited lower academic adjustment scores and less feelings of attachment to the institution. Reversely, students who lived on campus reported higher academic adjustment scores and more feelings of attachment toward their institution. This contradicts our prediction that living at home would protect students against negative college adjustment and contradicts findings by McDonald et al. (2018) indicating that nursing students who relocated from their home scored significantly lower on academic adjustment (as measured by the SACQ) than students who did not relocate. In other areas of college adjustment, however, commuter student status has been found to be negatively associated with college adjustment (Melendez, 2019). Melendez (2019) found that residential status was negatively associated with social adjustment and institutional attachment (as measured by the SACQ) in that students who lived on campus were better socially adjusted and felt a higher attachment to their institution. While the current study did not find a significant association between commuter student status and social adjustment, qualitative findings did suggest that commuter students had a harder time finding a social support system of friends at their institution. In another study looking at commuter students' attitudes and behaviors, it was found that commuter students were less likely to view their school as distinct or having a good reputation and similarly were less likely to identify with the institution than non-commuter students (Newbold et al., 2011). These findings indicate that commuter students may

have a harder time adjusting to college academically and socially while also feeling less attached to their institution. Colleges and universities may consider further exploring the experiences of commuter students to better support these students in their adjustment to college.

Commuter student status was also negatively correlated with mindfulness and self-kindness in that commuter students exhibited lower self-kindness and mindfulness scores than non-commuter students. Results of the multiple regression analysis identified similar findings. The only significant regression predicted mindfulness from commuter student status, first-generation student status, and first-year status. Commuter student status significantly contributed to the model in that living at home predicted an increase in mindfulness. When looking at stress management, a similar relationship has been found. In a study looking at commuter and residential students, Forbus et al. (2011a) found that commuter students displayed higher mean values for passive stress management (operationalized as "when things aren't going so well, I put things in a broader perspective, organize, and prioritize") than residential students. This suggests that commuter students may be more mindfully aware of their stress. One explanation for why commuter students may be more mindful and display increased negative active stress management is due to that fact that commuter students are often non-traditional college students or students who are older and more likely to be married and as a result may be more mature (Forbes et al., 2011b). The students surveyed in our study, however, were of similar age to the traditional college student and so it may be that even younger commuter students exhibit traits that help them be more mindful of their situation. More research needs to be done on this group of students however, to better understand this relationship between commuter student status and mindfulness.

The results of the multiple regression analysis also indicated that being a first-generation college student predicted a decrease in mindfulness. For first-generation college students, a lack of navigational support from parents was expressed as contributing to adjustment. On top of all the other stressors associated with the transition to college, first-generation college students also lacked support from their families, which could contribute to the decreased feelings of mindfulness. Similarly, Gibbons et al. (2019) found that one of the barriers to going to college for first-generation students was their parents' lack of experience and

complete understanding of the transition to college. Additionally, when looking at communication between first-generation college students and their parents about college, Palbusa and Gauvain (2017) found that first-generation college students found conversations with their parents less helpful and of poorer quality than students whose parents did attend college. Without the support from their families in understanding their experiences, first-generation college students may find it harder to stay mindful during stressful situations that arise during college.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, an a priori power analysis was not conducted to determine the appropriate number of students needed to achieve significant power. In future studies, a power analysis should be used to determine an appropriate sample size. Second, because the survey was only available for two weeks, this limited the time students could sign up for the study. It could be that those who did not sign up might have responded differently than those who did, thus changing the outcomes of the study. The setting and recruitment methods of the study also limit the ability to generalize the findings to other populations of college students. Since the study was conducted at only one women-centered institution, this limited the sampling pool to a majority female population and resulted in an all-female sample. Additionally, the majority of the current study's sample identified as white. Thus, findings may not be generalizable to other institutions or to students who identify as another gender, race, or ethnicity. Students were also recruited from psychology classrooms in which students could receive course credit for their participation. This further limited the sample to students taking psychology classes, and the experiences of students who take psychology classes may not be the same as those taking other courses. The layout of the survey is also a limitation to the study. Since students were asked to rate traits of self-compassion first, followed by questions of college adjustment, the order of the survey questions could have influenced students' answers to qualitative questions asking about self-care and adjustment.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest that commuter students and first-generation students may have a unique college experience that impacts their

adjustment to college. Because these groups have a harder time adjusting to college, more attention should be paid to them. To further understand their experiences, universities could ask these groups about their adjustment to college through yearly surveys; this way administrators could learn more about specific resources that could be offered to help increase positive adjustment. For example, because it has been found that commuter students struggle to create social support groups at school, creating a time at the beginning of the year for commuter students to connect with the on-campus student body may allow them to start building larger peer groups. While not observed in commuter students specifically, Mattanah et al. (2010) found that first-year students' participation in a social support group intervention during their first semester of college enhanced social adjustment to college. Additionally, students in the social support intervention group experience less loneliness than control students (Mattanah et al., 2010). It was also found that some first-generation students feel a lack of support from their family because they have not experienced college themselves. Creating a program for first-generation students' families about college life and how to support their student may increase family support for this group.

Finally, self-compassion was positively associated with college adjustment, and self-kindness was specifically endorsed across student group membership as an important factor in positive college adjustment. Self-compassion is a skill that can be taught, as demonstrated by a recent meta-analysis of self-compassion intervention studies (Ferrari et al., 2019). Intervention programs could be run at the beginning of the semester then, in which students can learn a variety of techniques that could help them cope with the stresses of college life. One such self-compassion program that has been found to increase self-compassion, mindfulness, life satisfaction, connectedness, optimism, and self-efficacy, while decreasing rumination in female college students is the Mindfulness Self-Compassion program (MSC; Neff & Germer, 2013; Smeets et al., 2014). In addition, a version of the MSC has been created specifically for young people. Making Friends with Yourself (MFY; Bluth et al., 2016), like MSC, focuses on teaching skills to build resilience and improve emotional wellbeing. MFY has also been found to increase self-compassion. In combination, these findings suggest that offering programs on campus designed to increase self-compassion may be helpful to students as they adjust to college life.

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Conclusion

This study contributed to the understanding of college adjustment by looking at the role of self-compassion and by exploring the unique experiences of specific groups of students as they adapt to college life. Further studies need to be conducted, however, to see if associations between college adjustment and self-compassion can be found in larger, more diverse samples. Additionally, future research on this topic should take into account the effects of other variables that may be correlated with college adjustment such as academic self-efficacy and other academic skills such as test taking ability. Finally, more research needs to be done on other groups of students that have been identified as being at risk for negative adjustment such as ethnic minority groups or nursing students, as well as groups of students who may be protected from negative adjustment such as athletes.

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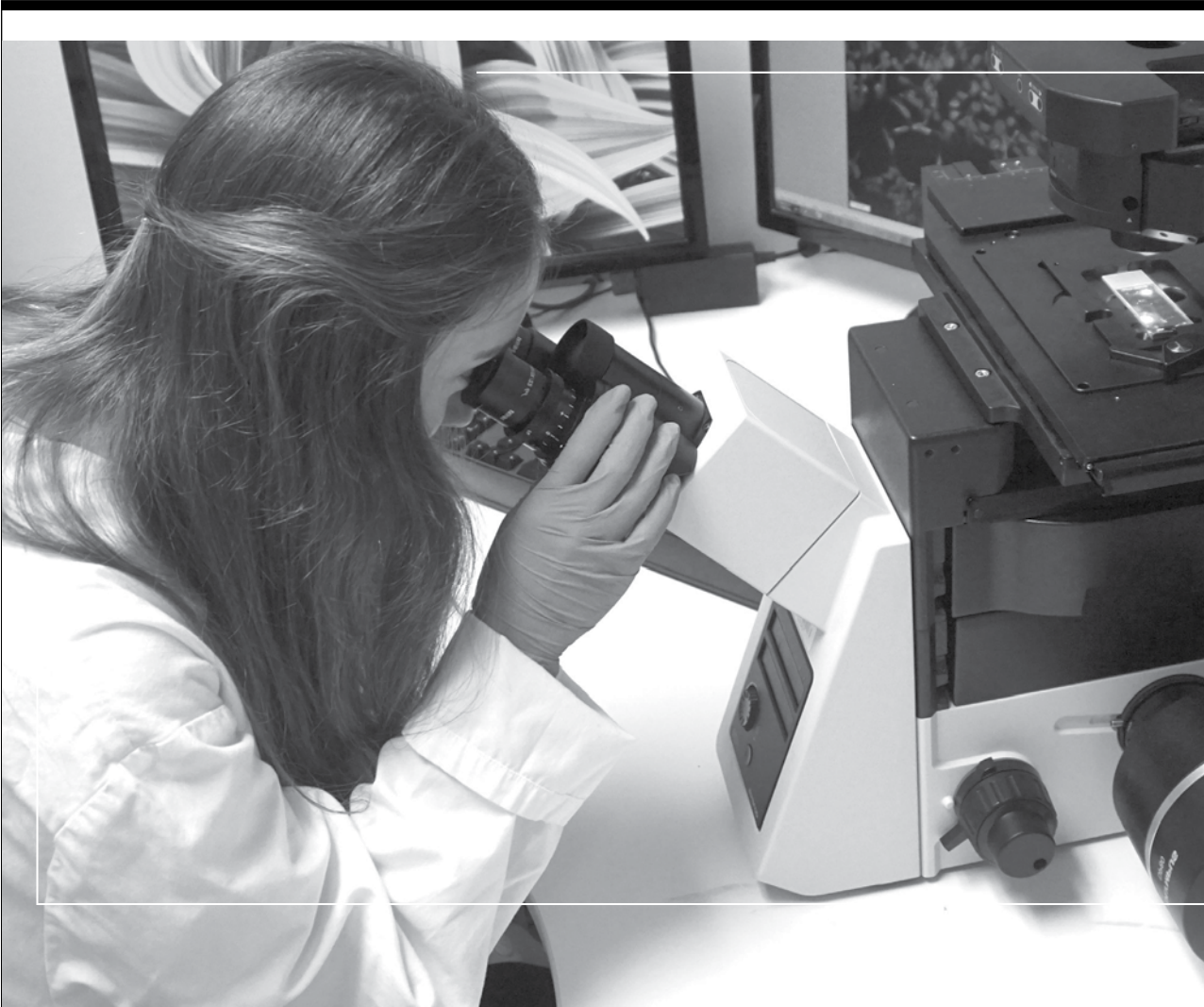


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