



# Stressors associated with the school spillover of college undergraduates



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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, stressors associated with university students' school spillover are examined. Spillover occurs when stress transfers from one domain to another (e.g., school to family). Data were taken from a sample of undergraduates age 18–29 enrolled at a mid-size Midwestern university ( $N = 250$ ). The strongest associations with school spillover were those related to academics and coursework, and interpersonal conflicts. Among the significant stressors, undergraduate women were more likely than men to report family issues as causing them stress. Undergraduate women also reported significantly higher levels of school spillover than men. The likelihood of experiencing the considered stressors did not vary by age or class level, nor did school spillover. Implications of these findings are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Stress is a common feature of everyday life, influencing the daily functions of individuals across the lifespan (Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Viner, 1999). One group for whom stress is particularly acute is college students (Pierceall & Keim, 2007), who report significantly higher levels of stress than the general population (Adlaf, Gliksman, Demers, & Newton-Taylor, 2001; Stewart-Brown et al., 2000). Perhaps due to mounting academic pressures, the stress confronted by university students has risen dramatically in the recent past to reach its highest level yet (Abouserie, 1994; Kitzrow, 2003; Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Palucki Blake, & Tran, 2010; Sax, 1997, 2003). Eighty percent of students indicate

they feel at least moderately stressed (Abouserie, 1994). This trend is also reflected in annual surveys of college freshmen indicating that emotional health is at its lowest recorded level (Pryor et al., 2010). More students, both high school seniors preparing to enter college as well as college freshmen, report feeling overwhelmed by obligations (Pryor et al., 2012; Sax, 1997). Many report being burned out (Anderson & Cole, 2001).

The stressors students experience originate from many sources, including the personal, academic, financial, and familial (Astin, 1998; Dusselier, Dunn, Wang, Shelley, & Whalen, 2005; Hwang & Goto, 2008; Mendoza, 1981; Rocha-Singh, 1994; Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999). University students face a number of new challenges, such as living independently, while losing the daily instrumental support of family members and structure provided by high school (Larson, 2006). Studying for exams, academic performance, time pressure and having too much to do, the persistence and magnitude of course expectations, the rising financial cost of higher education, future careers, and social relationships are chief among the causes of college student stress (Abouserie, 1994; Astin, 1998;

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DeRoma, Leach, & Leverett, 2009; Dill & Henley, 1998; Larson, 2006; Macan, Shahani, Dipboye, & Phillips, 1990; Ross et al., 1999). Among activities rated the most stressful, those related to school are most prevalent (Larson, 2006; McGrath, 2006).

Though a moderate level of stress is in fact beneficial to motivation and performance (Ross et al., 1999), when stress levels become too high there is a price to be paid in role performance and health (Bonner & Rich, 1988; Frazier & Schauben, 1994; Lumley & Provenzano, 2003), particularly academic performance and degree progress (Baker, 2002; Garden, 1991; Goldman & Wong, 1997; Hojat, Gonella, Erdman, & Vogel, 2003; Vaez & Laflamme, 2008). In turn, when students are stressed because of their academic lives, they may find difficulty creating balance and harmony between all the roles that compete for their time and attention. The tension they feel may bleed into other aspects of their daily experience to create role conflict (Hudd et al., 2000). This transfer of stress from one domain to another is known as cross-domain stress or spillover (Thoits, 1995). For instance, when a student faces a number of looming academic deadlines, he or she may have less time to visit with friends and family or may need to cut back hours of paid employment. In this scenario, the student experiences school spillover.

While there is a large body of literature focusing on the cross-domain stresses faced by working adults, such as work-family spillover, much less is known about the cross-domain stresses experienced by college students. The focus of the current paper is an examination of undergraduate students' school spillover. The following questions are asked: first, given the prevalence of academic stressors facing college students, which of these stressors are associated with the likelihood of school spilling over into other role domains? Second, among the stressors most likely to produce school spillover, do differences in reporting exist on the basis of gender, age, or class level? Third, does school spillover vary on the basis of gender, age, or class level? These questions are answered using data taken from a sample of undergraduates enrolled at a mid-size Midwestern university ( $N=250$ ). This work is meant to prompt empirical conversations about school spillover, a relatively new and unexamined concept in the spillover literature that can contribute to understanding student stress. As noted, the analysis comes within a period of rising academic demands and increasing stress levels among university students. Given the link between stress, depression, and other mental health issues, including suicidal ideation (Howard, Schiraldi, Pineda, & Campanella, 2006), academic stressors and school spillover are important constructs worthy of attention.

## 2. Literature review

Stress is a commonly studied phenomenon. McGrath (2006, p. 135) describes stress as a "psychological and physical arousal to the demands of life. A stressful situation is one appraised as taxing or exceeding one's personal resources and endangering well-being." Stress is almost universally experienced during times of transition (Daugherty & Lane, 1999). College students are in a unique

developmental period during which they must learn to navigate multiple transitions related to both emerging adulthood and university life (Arnett, 2004). Given the weight of these demands, it is no surprise that most college students rate the severity of their stress as being moderate or serious (Abouserie, 1994). With regard to gender, female students report higher levels of stress than males and feel less confident about their ability to cope with stress (Abouserie, 1994; Brougham, Zail, Mendoza, & Miller, 2009; Dusselier et al., 2005; Hudd et al., 2000; Pierceall & Keim, 2007; Sax, 1997). One study suggests that over 60% of college women report stress, compared to about 36% of men (Hudd et al., 2000). By class level, freshman and sophomore students feel higher levels of stress than their peers who have been enrolled at university for a longer time (Misra, McKean, West, & Russo, 2000; Pryor et al., 2012).

The stressors that may contribute to eventual feelings of stress come in two different forms: life events and chronic strains (Pearlin, 1989). This study is concerned with chronic strains – the longer term stressors that present ongoing challenges for college students. There are a wide variety of chronic strains felt by students, the most common of which are related to social relationships, role strains, finances, and academics (Howard et al., 2006). The transition to college marks a time when traditional supports, such as family and friends from high school, are not as accessible. Though still influential in terms of behavioral outcomes (Vidourek & King, 2013), these networks are not as readily available when support is needed. In addition to the strain of separation, the process of forging new connections may be viewed as stressful. Social events that may otherwise be viewed as fun may in fact increase stress when social bonds are new or just forming (Dill & Henley, 1998). Sexual relationships must be navigated (Howard et al., 2006). And role strain is high. A study by Larson (2006) indicates that college students' time is primarily devoted to school activities, but they work nearly as much as they study. Student stress is also associated with financial burdens and perceptions of future employment opportunities, and this stress increases as students move through their years at university (Guo, Wang, Johnson, & Diaz, 2011). When it comes to academic stressors, the perception of excess – in how much material must be learned, time demands, the level of intellectual challenge presented by coursework – is related to whether something is considered a stressor (Blackmore, Tucker, & Jones, 2005).

Dealing with the stressors of emerging adulthood requires a skill set that college students must achieve mastery over, much as they learn other skills. Chief among these are time management and effective study techniques (Brown, 1991; Larson, 2006; Nonis, Hudson, Logan, & Ford, 1998; Ross et al., 1999). But when this skill set is lacking, or stressors combine to produce a level of stress that taxes a student's reserves, they may react with irritability, agitation, or anger, and feel exhausted or preoccupied (McGrath, 2006). Some students may attempt to cope through avoidance of stressors, while others use positive reappraisal and/or social support (Blake & Vandiver, 1988; Mattlin, Wethington, & Kessler, 1990). Left unmanaged, high levels of stress and poor emotional health have a negative influence on academic performance (Pritchard

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