

# COLLEGE RELATIONSHIPS AND GRADES

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*ABSTRACT: Emerging adulthood is when many college students experience a reduced level of parental involvement and increasing adulthood responsibilities. Some of the responsibilities include being on one's own for the first time, friendship, family, work and college responsibilities. This proposal explores the association of dating and grades in college among college-age students in Washington State's universities. Using a cross-sectional design with an online survey, the proposal asks demographic questions, as well as dating-related questions, along with academic success questions such as grades received, and number of hours studied each week. The results are expected to yield differences among year in college, how long students have been in a relationship and academic success.*

## Introduction

Emerging adulthood is the development period from late teens through early twenties, ages 18-25, in which many college students experience a reduced level of parental involvement and increasing adulthood responsibilities (Arnett, 2000). Arnett (2000) suggested that these emerging adults are in a time of frequent change and exploration. In addition, for many people the late teens to early twenties is a time for many possibilities with regard to worldview, romantic relationships and communication (Arnett, 2000).

College students have numerous options for communication and interactions using social media and mobile communication devices. Social interactions play an important role in helping students adjust to college with today's multimedia society. Jacobsen and Forste (2011) noted that college students today are using electronic media higher than any previous generation. Some examples of social media include Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. In fact, college students use an average of 12 hours per day on electronic media, including texting and talking on the phone (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011). Even though some students may use excessive waking hours on social media, it serves as a way to help with college success. This is because social networking sites can serve as a way for

students to develop their identity and help with the stress of college (Pierceall & Keim, 2007). Other predictors of academic success include students' cognitive abilities such as intelligence, students' interests in a specific subject and their motivational factors to do well in college (Cheng, Ickes, & Verhofstad, 2012).

Along with many new ways of communication, current college students have many responsibilities and new experiences in their environment which lead to an increase in stress. Pierceall and Keim's (2007) research show approximately 75% of college students considered themselves moderately stressed and about 12% were severely stressed. Stress during the transition to independence includes academic, financial, time or relationship-related (Dusselier, Dunn, Wang, Shelley, & Whalen, 2005). Female students were found to experience higher stress levels compared to male students (Pierceall & Keim, 2007). It is not surprising that college students experience many stressors including academic issues, financial concerns, and lack of sleep (Abouserie, 1994; Arnett, 2000; Dusselier et al., 2005). Academic-related activities such as the rigors of course load, examinations and students' high expectations of doing well contributed the most to university students' stress (Abouserie, 1994; Dusselier et al., 2005). Arnett (2000) noted about one third of students who go off to college after high school spend their

next several years in independent living such as the college dormitory or a fraternity or sorority house. Finances associated with living away from home means having to work while in college and relying on family at the same time while juggling other environmental factors such as lack of time (Darling & Turkki, 2009). Juggling hours at work and college expectations contribute negatively to students' health including inadequate sleep (Dusselier et al., 2005). However, students have family and social support which contributes to their academic success.

Numerous studies show the positive association between family and social support and college success. For example, Alnabhan, Al-Zegoul, and Harwell's (2001) study showed higher university GPA is associated with the presence of strong family support. Similarly, another research demonstrated family interaction acted as a stress buffering mechanism which is a contributing factor to high academic performance (Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, & Russell, 1994). In addition, Stecker (2004) found that students in their early academic years who had regular contacts with their family dealt with academic challenges better than students who did not have regular family interactions and support. Regular family interaction plays a significant role in students' academic success because it helps students cope with stress as well as increase their satisfaction while in college.

While stress may act as a hindrance or a risk factor to life satisfaction among college students, being in a relationship may serve as a protective factor. Arnett (2000) argued that the forming and continuing to be in a romantic relationship is essential to college students' lives. This agrees with Dusselier et al.'s (2005) study in which they suggested that romantic relationships contributed to college students' overall happiness and satisfaction with life. This is because romantic relationships are viewed as the closest relationship in which college students are engaged in that contribute to their overall happiness and life satisfaction (Arnett, 2000). Other contributing factors to life satisfaction include personal characteristics.

Personal characteristics such as age and gender

may play a role in forming romantic relationships and life satisfaction. Men and women have different time management skills, social behaviors and factors that contribute to their stress differently. For example, Dusselier et al. (2005) found that women reported better time management skills compared with men in college. With respect to age, older students appear to have better time management skills compared with younger students while younger students spend more time on social media compared to older students (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011; Netting & Reynolds, 2018). However, older students usually have more environmental pressures than younger students such as family responsibilities and jobs. Regardless of age, personal behaviors have great influences on college students' life satisfaction and relationships.

Negative personal behaviors such as poor sleep and engaging in non-social interactions may hinder college students' life satisfaction. Dusselier et al.'s (2005) study showed an association of irregular sleeping patterns to students' low grades and also lower life satisfaction compared with those who get regular sleep. The use of electronic media among today's college students far exceeded all previous generations of college students (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011). Electronic media may entice students to engage in more non-social interactions such as watching online TV shows or online gaming. The large volume of college materials to master in such a short time each quarter and the stress of taking exams may lead students to revert to non-social online activities as a way for students to cope (Abouserie, 1994; Jacobsen & Forste, 2011). Other ways that college students use to cope with stress and maintain life satisfaction is that of having romantic relationships.

Dating and having romantic relationships are a normal part of college life for many students. Kuperberg and Padgett (2015) defined "hookup" as a "casual, noncommittal encounter of a sexual nature between two individuals, which may or may not include sex" (p. 517). In the U.S., some characteristics of hookups in college students include gender and class standing differences. Males tend to hook up more than females,

and freshmen tend to have more hookups than upperclassmen since freshmen are experimenting with their new freedom (Kuperberg & Padgett, 2015). Women place more emphasis in avoiding risk taking in hookups than men because of the increased personal risk of pregnancy and sexual assault during sexual encounters (Kuperberg & Padgett, 2015). Students who are in upperclassmen status seemed less interested in hookups and more interested in dating (Kuperberg & Padgett, 2015), and also older emerging adults in early to mid-20s may be ready to be involved in a deeper level of intimacy (Arnett, 2000).

The definition of a committed romantic relationship is exclusively dating one individual in college for at least six months. There is a plethora of research on dating violence, hookups and stress associated with college students. However, there seems to be a lack of research on the association of being in a romantic relationship and academic success in college.

### Current Study

The current study aims to examine the association of being in a committed romantic relationship and academic success in college. This study will use a theoretical framework of emerging adulthood outlined by Arnett (2000) on the development of late teens through twenties. Arnett (2000) suggested the concept of development in the emerging adults is a subjective balance of new, relationship, and responsibilities with the rigors of school, while still trying to live independently with some reliance on families. In addition, this study will also use the framework proposed by Darling and Turkki (2009) in which each individual is influenced by their environmental factors such as family interactions, work, peers, and physical surroundings. In addition, biological characteristics as mentioned above such as work and family obligations, age, gender and adequate sleep also contribute to a student's overall life satisfaction.

For this study, there are two research questions: RQ1) Is there a positive association between being in a romantic relationship and academic success among

college students? RQ2) How does the amount of time spent studying in college affect the quality of relationship? The first hypothesis is that there is a positive association academic success and being in a romantic relationship. The second hypothesis is that the increase in time spent studying has little effect on the quality of romantic relationship. The independent variable is romantic relationship and the dependent variable is academic success.

## Methods

### Study Design

This study will use a cross-sectional study design. Participants will be allowed to respond one time using an online anonymous survey.

#### *Proposed Sample, Sampling Frame and Sampling Technique*

The proposed sampling frame will consist of undergraduate students attending the University of Washington (UW) tri-campus of Bothell, Seattle and Tacoma and students from the three campuses of Washington State University (WSU) located in Everett, Spokane and Vancouver.

Students attending the three UW and three WSU campuses (a total of six universities) will be contacted online to determine if they are interested in participating in the online survey. The inclusion criteria include at least 18 year olds, undergraduates, marital status including single, engaged, married and divorced students, and currently attending UW or WSU at least part-time (taking two classes). The exclusion criteria include anyone attending college taking less than two classes, or not attending the six campuses mentioned above. It is hoped to have at least 2,000 students who will respond to take the online survey.

The sampling technique that will be used is random probability sampling. Structured questions that are closed-ended will be asked in the survey. The survey will contain questions with multiple choice answers and the survey will be anonymous.

Each school will be contacted for permission to post the online survey. Upon approval from each of the six participating universities, a student researcher (SR) attending each of the six universities

will provide each school's contact a copy of the flyer and survey as part of the approval process. After that, the SR will post colorful and eye-catching flyers containing the study's information and online survey in places where all undergraduate students frequent such as campus cafeterias, student unions and recreational centers. Flyers will contain information about the anonymous study such as its purpose, recruiting undergraduates to respond to the survey, the one-week time frame the students can log in in order to complete the survey, the link to the survey, whom to contact for questions about the study, and a chance to win one of the 200 \$25 Visa gift cards upon completion of the survey. After the completion of the survey, a drawing will be conducted a week after for those who wish to enter the random drawing. All that is required is that they add their name, email address or cell phone number so that they can be entered into the drawing.

### **Data Collection Method**

An online survey will be available for one week in order for students to participate in the survey. Interested students can log in to the link provided on the flyers as well as from the all campus email blast at their university. Once the students click on the link, the survey will appear with a short description of the study including the study's purpose, it is anonymous, to answer each question truthfully, and study's results will be shared with the six universities after they are analyzed and written up within six months after the study is over. The directions will also include an optional chance at the end for each participant to enter the drawing for the \$25 Visa gift card. Each student will only be allowed to take the survey once. Using an online survey tool such as Survey Monkey (SM), data will be collected using SM and will be downloaded daily during the one-week survey period open to students at the six campuses. All students who wished to enter the gift card drawing will have their information stored separately.

### **Construct Operationalization and Measurement**

The survey will contain 20 multiple choice questions. The survey will ask about demographic

data such as the student's age, gender, and year in school. The survey will also ask each student's major or intended major, how many hours they work per week, if any, how many classes they are taking, and hours per week each student spent study excluding the hours they attend classes. Hours spent studying each week is measured by using the response options of 1-4 hours per week, 4-6, 6-8, 8-10, 10 or more hours/week. Academic success is measured by using each student's cumulative grade point average (GPA) as of the previous quarter. The GPA is measured using a four-point scale of A=3.5-4.0, B=2.8 – 3.49, C= 2.0-2.79 and D=1.0-1.99.

Questions about committed romantic relationships using an interval scale include: "Are you in a committed romantic relationship? This means that one is exclusively dating one person for at least six months" and the responses are "0 = no relationship, 1 = in relationship for less than 6 months; 3= in relationship for 6-12 months, 4= in relationship for 12-24 months, 5 = in relationship for more than 24 months". A question about marital status will be measured dichotomously with a yes or no responses. The next question is "How much time do you spend with your girlfriend/boyfriend/significant other each week?" and response choices include "0-1 hour, 1-3 hours, 3-5 hours, 5-7 hours, more than 7 hours each week". The survey also contains a question about how many people they are dating in the past six months (this question will confirm that each student is in a committed romantic relationship).

Also, the survey will contain questions about students' views on romantic relationship, average hours of sleep each night for the past week, how often they use electronic devices each week, and if they receive financial assistance from their parents, their support system such as how supportive their friends, family members and co-workers, if applicable. The last question of the survey will be an open-ended question that asks, "Is there anything else you'd like to share with us about your college experience, dating, committed relationship or anything else?" There will be a blank space where the students can write their own responses for this question, if they wish to do so. Each student will

have a chance to review their responses to the 20 questions before they submit the online survey. In the analysis section, all multiple-choice questions will be analyzed using quantitative multivariate analysis, controlling for the number of classes each student takes. The last question will use qualitative analysis since it is an open-ended question.

The purpose of the study is to examine if there is an association between being in a committed romantic relationship and academic success among college students. The study also will assess whether number of hours spent studying has any association with being in a romantic relationship or not. Lastly, the study hopes to see whether environmental factors such as family and/or friends' support such as financial and emotional support play a role in their life satisfaction and romantic relationships while in college.

### Limitations

The study has a few limitations. First, the study design is a cross-sectional design of one-time data gathering of students at six campuses; therefore, causality such as being in a romantic relationship and academic success cannot be inferred to all students. Second, the results are limited to the students at the six campuses and cannot be generalized to students at other colleges and universities. Third, it is an online survey and we cannot determine the truthfulness of the students' self-reported survey items such as GPA and whether they are in a committed romantic relationship of at least six months or not. Also, it cannot be determined whether a student is needing money and participated in the survey just for the \$25 drawing, leaving many questions blank and therefore will affect the study's results.

Other limitations include the types of questions asked and not asked. For example, some students may feel uncomfortable about questions such as how many hours they spent online using electronic media such as cell phone, online gaming and watching online TV shows. Students' uneasiness and possibly untruthfulness in answering these questions may affect how they respond to other questions in the survey. Some questions that

were not asked include examining students who are married and if they do better in college compared with students who are in committed relationships. Also, academic majors and intended majors were asked, but it may be hard to find an association between majors, the ability to be in a romantic relationship and academic success. The study touched on environmental factors such as family and peer financial and emotional support; also, whether the students participate in religious attendance or not may act as protective factors which were not examined in this study. These factors would be an interesting follow up for a future longitudinal study following the students from the time they are freshmen to the completion of their senior year.

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