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**Romance in College: Effects of Relationship Stress and Commitment
on Scholastic Performance**

Lauren Alderson and Kate Gruenloh

Due to the increased number of observed college students involved in romantic relationships, we decided to conduct a study to see if any correlation existed between those involved in romantic relationships and the students' academics. In addition to this hypothesis, we were also interested in the varying levels of stress and commitment of a romantic relationship and their influence on academic performance. However after surveying 66 college participants regarding their feelings and opinions about their current or past relationships, our statistical findings did not support our initial research hypothesis.

College can be a severely conflicting period in a young adult's life. During college we all take on a handful of different roles such as the girlfriend or boyfriend or the co-chair of an organization in addition to being a student, and all of them seem to conflict at some point in time. In their research on types of stressors, Serido, Almeida, and Wethington (2004) defined this type of conflict as a chronic stressor "whose one source may be the strains associated with the interaction of the individual and conditions in carrying out the responsibilities of major social roles" (p 18). Instead of focusing on all of the different types of social roles a college student could take on, the primary purpose of our study is to research two of the roles a young adult can encounter during their college years, a student vs. a girlfriend/boyfriend, and determine if there is any correlation between these two roles in regards to stress and academic success.

In his dissertation, Sgobbo (2000) recruited 50 male students from the Western Connecticut State University in order to answer a questionnaire regarding the costs and benefits

of dating in college. The questionnaire incorporated non-standardized questions the researcher had created in addition to standardized rating scales from Cohen's Couples Satisfaction Inventory. After the raw scores were analyzed, Sgobbo found that the men reported dating to have more benefits than costs. Stress was found to be a cost in regards to having a relationship, but surprisingly over 60% of the participants' proposed alternative ways from which to reduce the stress. Overall, the research results seemed focused on the positives of dating and how it provided an opportunity for social interaction, satisfied Maslow's proposed need of emotional fulfillment, was related to higher self-esteem, and helped students with their creativity with time management and listening skills (two factors that could be beneficial correlated with academics).

Meanwhile on the opposite end of the spectrum, Kopfler (2003) hypothesized that students who were involved in romantic relationships would not perform well academically in undergraduate courses. Unfortunately after calculating the data from this survey, the results did not support his hypothesis. However, a relationship was observed between participants involved in romantic relationships and higher levels of stress.

While looking into college academics and relationships, Mosher and Danoff-Burg (2007) became interested if gender can also play a role in the way college students prioritize where their academics lie. This can also depend on what intimate relationship means to a specific individual. Researchers gave a questionnaire that measured different aspects of a given relationship to 237 undergraduate students' ages 16 to 25 years old. While both men and women reported high ratings for individual achievement and intimate relationships, approximately 61% of males and 51% of female chose the relationship over career and education related goals. The article states, "The boys and men were particularly more likely to swap a career and/or education for a

‘charming companions’” (p.31). This reports that college males in this particular study found romantic relationships to hold more priority over their careers and education.

A study done by Pistole and Vocaturo (1999) focused more specifically on the romantic relationships of college students and not just their academic success pertaining to their romantic relationships. Pistole and Vocaturo (1999) found that “Commitment in college students’ romantic relationships is of concern because forming a central, committed relationship to anchor life and career is a major development agenda for young adults and clients in college counseling center frequently struggle with issues related to romantic relationships” (p.716). They discussed how since divorce rates are so much higher than years ago; being in a committed relationship has more importance. Researchers distributed a 60-item Commitment Inventory to 135 undergraduate participants to help define what type of commitment level their relationship was at. The three types of commitment were secure attachment, dismissing-avoidance and preoccupied. The results of the study found there were no significant differences between commitment level for sex and ethnicity, although there was a significant difference found between relationship status and personal dedication. This study helped look at the research being conducted and how we need to breakdown the different components of a relationship, such as commitment level, and examine how those additional factors play a role in grade point averages (GPA).

Another variable that also could be looked at regarding college academic success and romantic relationships are the individuals distance. “It is a common occurrence that students enter college while still engaged in a romantic relationship that began in high school. Going away to college creates geographical distance between individuals involved in the relationship, and now these individuals have to deal with the problems associated with being in a LDR (long

distance relationship” (Shumway, 2004, p.2). This statement is very true and can definitely make an impact on a relationship; especially while in college. The researcher interested in the differences in long distance relationship and proximal relationships with relation to the factors of intimacy, passion, commitment and satisfaction. Shumway (2004) hypothesized that participants in long distance relationships would have lower levels of these variables than those in proximal relationships. However, results found that there was no significant difference in satisfaction, intimacy or passion. Shumway’s study focused on long distance and proximal distance and their level of commitment, passion and intimacy and even though there was no significant difference found in the study, it can definitely seem like an aspect of a college individual’s life that could affect their academic success.

The purpose of this study was to research if there is a correlation between romantic relationships and college academics defined by the students’ cumulative grade point averages (GPA). In the studies explained above, the results varied from one study to the next in relation to the effect romantic relationships can have on college academic. In addition to this, a few of the researchers took their interest in romantic relationships one step further to order to discover the different aspects of romantic relationships. Therefore using past research as a foundation, we wanted to investigate the components of stress and commitment levels of romantic relationships as reported by college students. In addition to this researchers also hypothesized if an individual is involved in an understanding, loving relationship with their partner that involves a limited amount of stress, they will have a higher G.P.A than a student who is in an unstable, stressful relationship.

Method

Participants

Sixty-six undergraduate students from Lindenwood University were recruited through the Human Subject Pool (HSP) and two upper division psychology courses taught by Dr. Bruce B. Kelly. The students from the Human Subject Pool are students who are currently enrolled in a 100 Psychology, Sociology, or Anthropology undergraduate course. The combined sample of students was comprised of 26 men and 40 women consisting of 22 freshman, 10 sophomores, 16 juniors, and 18 seniors.

The participants who were recruited through the Human Subject Pool (HSP) received the promised bonus points for their participation that could be used toward their respective courses and a hearty thank you, while those who participated from Dr. Bruce Kelly's Social Psychology (PSY334) and Health Psychology (PSY220) classes received a gracious thank you for their time and patience. At the IRB application process of this study, the researchers were going to give out Hershey kisses as a gesture of gratitude, however due to a few unforeseen circumstances the researchers did not have the kisses for the first group of participants; therefore they could not be used as compensation.

Materials

A computer printer and copy machine were used to make the 200 plus copies of the required informed consent form (Appendix A), an additional informed consent form (Appendix B), appropriate HSP documents (participant receipts, feedback letters, and participant sign up forms) and survey (Appendix C) for the subjects. In addition to the standard informed consent form, the researchers made an additional form from which participants were given the option of allowing researchers to verify their cumulative grade point averages. However due to a time

restraint, these forms were discarded. The survey had ten questions regarding age, gender, class level, in addition to questions regarding their current relationship status and opinions regarding factors relating to romantic relationships and academics.

After all of the appropriate copies had been made, researchers gained permission from the Dean of Science, Dr. Marilyn Abbott, to facilitate room 301 of Young Hall for the distribution of surveys to the HSP recruits. The room consisted of 40 desks arranged in stadium style seating with one large table and podium in the front of the room.

Dr. Bruce Kelly's Health Psychology class was held in room Young 404. This room held 45 desks in rows of 5 with one large desk and podium at the front of the room. Meanwhile, Dr. Kelly's Health Psychology class was held in Young 301, the classroom held the same properties and characteristics from the time it was used for the Human Subject Pool recruits.

Participants used a pen or pencil to indicate on a ten question survey (Appendix C) their current relationship status and feelings regarding romantic relationships and stress levels. The format of the survey consisted of multiple free response and rating scale questions in order to gather the most information regarding the participants' beliefs and opinions. A few of the questions were directed towards individuals currently in a relationship and their self-reported level of stress and commitment. However if the participant was not in a relationship, if they were asked to express their opinion on whether they believed a relationship would effect their academics in some manner.

Procedure

The participants recruited from the Human Subject Pool were required to sign up on the Human Subject Pool Board for one of 15 spots in a designated 15 minute time slot. At their designated times, subjects were required to come to Young 301 and sit down wherever they

wanted, the participants in Health Psychology and Social Psychology also chose from the available seating in their classroom. All students were first given the same two informed consent forms, one for the researchers' records and one for their own records, from which they could sign to acknowledge they understood and fully agreed to participate in the experiment. The participants were told that if at any time they wished to not participate in the study they would not be penalized. In addition to this, participants were given an additional informed consent form concerning the release of their correct grade point averages before taking the survey, however these were later discarded. After those forms were filled out, the students then took the survey concerning romantic relationships and stress levels. Following the completion of the survey, the participants were thoroughly debriefed and told if they had any questions or concerns regarding the study could contact us at any time. After the surveys, consent forms, participant receipt form were completed, the participants who were recruited through the Human Subject Pool were told to turn in their participant receipt to the Human Subject Pool office. Meanwhile, those participants who were not recruited through the Human Subject Pool turned in their surveys and appropriate consent forms and then were given a gracious thank you for their participation in our study.

Finally, after all of the completed surveys were organized and collected, an identification number was assigned to the survey in correspondence with the participant who completed the survey. When all identification numbers were assigned, the data from each participant was then inputted into SPSS program and the data were analyzed to find if the hypothesis of whether being in a romantic relationship is correlated with college academics and grade point average.

Results

College Academics and Relationships

One hypothesis of this study was that grade point averages are correlated in some manner with undergraduate students who were in a relationship. More specifically, those students who were currently in a relationship were more likely to have a grade point average that is affected by their relationship.

However, the correlation between cumulative grade point average and level of commitment was not found to be significant ($n=44$, $r=.030$, $p>.05$). In addition, the correlation between cumulative grade point average and level stress also did not find significance, $r=.076$, $p=.05$. The first variable the researchers examined was the sample size and how many were involved in a romantic relationship. Out of the 66 participants, only 44 of the participants were in a romantic relationship. Then of those 44 participants involved in a relationship, 1.5% reported they were in a relationship but it was not committed, 7.6% reported they were in a 'somewhat committed' relationship, 22.7% reported they were in a 'committed' relationship and 34.8% reported they were involved in a 'very committed' relationship.

Additionally of the 44 participants who were asked about their level of stress in a relationship 22.7% reported there was 'no stress' in their relationship, 36.4% reported they were 'somewhat stressed' in their relationship and 7.6% reported being 'stressed' in their relationship. There were no reports of being 'very stressed' from any of the 44 participants that were currently involved.

Researchers assigned a rating scale of 1 thru 4 in relation to the various levels of stress and commitment. A rating of 1 represented the levels of no stress and no commitment. 2 was concurrent with the self-reported levels of 'somewhat committed' and 'somewhat stressed'. 3

was assigned to the levels of 'committed' and 'stressed'. While 4 represented a rating of 'very committed' and 'very stressed', as a result the mean analyses of level of commitment was 3.36, while the mean analyses of level stress was 1.77.

The lengths of the relationships ranged widely from the shortest relationship being one month and the longest relationship being six years, additionally the grade point averages ranged from a cumulative of 1.8 to a 4.0. Prior to starting the study, the researchers had an additional optional consent form asking participants for their permission to retrieve their official grade point average from the registrar. Conversely, due to lack of time during study, the researchers were unable to receive those official grade point averages.

Relationship Factors

In the survey, an open-ended question was directed toward the individuals currently involved in a relationship, which asked "Do you feel a relationship is related to the level or outcome of your academics? If yes, please explain. The majority of the participants reported they did feel a relationship was related to the outcome and gave explanations ranging from a relationship can place excessive stress on academics to the time needed to maintain a relationship can affect time needed for scholastics. Then when asked a second open ended question regarding what factors from their relationship they believed played a role in their academic. Participants reported factors including stress, grade improvement, problems with time management, and an improvement in prioritizing, just to name a few. Meanwhile 19.7% of the participants in a relationship reported that being in a relationship has no outcome on their academics.

Lastly, there was an open-ended question asked to the 22 participants that were not involved in a relationship as to whether they believed if they were in a relationship would it relate to their academics. The surveys reported that 22% participants believed that it would not

have an effect. However for the 78% of participants who believed it would have an affect, their answers surrounded the idea that they would have to learn to juggle and balance their school work and relationship.

Discussion

Unfortunately, after analyzing our statistical data, the present findings fail to support the non-directional hypothesis that romantic relationships correlated with self-reported G.P.A's. However, the study did show that despite the individuals' different grade point averages and varying opinions, the subjects held the belief that a relationship did have some sort of influence, positive and/or negative, on academics.

Therefore one issue could be that our questions regarding the opinion of the subjects were too open-ended and needed to be more specific. For instance, after asking the participants who were in relationship whether romantic relationships and academics were related. We could have just asked them to answer the question with a simple yes or no response, then in correspondence with those who believed there was a relation we could have had them chose whether they believed the relationship between the two variables was positive or negative. Then for the next open ended question concerning relationship factors that affected academics, we would recommend to change the format to a multiple choice answer structure including several positive and negative factors as reported in Sgobbo's (2000) dissertation. Also, as a side note in order to provide the participants with additional clarification we should have provided the definitions for what we meant by commitment and stress.

However there are several alternative explanations as to why we obtained the results that we did. Even though we asked participants to sign an additional consent form concerning the release of their cumulative G.P.A we found ourselves pressed for time and were unable to obtain

them and discarded the forms. Therefore, since we were unable to determine their precise G.P.As, our collected finding related to the student's estimated G.P.As could be a misrepresentation of the actual G.P.As. As a result, we would recommend putting aside an appropriate amount of time to allow for the verification of the subjects cumulative G.P.As.

In addition to this we could also question as to whether the subjects answers on the surveys provided an accurate representation of their true feelings. Even though we asked participants to be as honest as possible, some could have entered responses they believed we would expect to receive or tried to follow a popular response pattern. Some could have stated they were in a relationship, when in fact they were not or else they could have been overwhelmed by the broad degree of the questions, again leading us to believe we should have restricted the types of responses. Finally, a larger sample size would have helped us gain a more representative sample of college students. By limiting our data collection to the undergraduate population in the science division, we could have created an unintentional bias. Perhaps all of the students who we surveyed had a certain principle instilled in them by their particular science classes and thereby this created a biased sample. Also taking this one step further, perhaps Lindenwood's curriculum is bias and for future studies researchers should attempt to include subjects from other colleges in order to gain a more representative sample of collegiate students.

In conclusion, despite the lack of significance found from our correlational analyses perhaps by altering the format of the questions asked on the survey and clarifying the particular variables future researchers would be able to replicate our study and find some sort of significance.

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form

I _____ (print name), understand that I will be taking part in a research project that will require me to fill out a survey regarding personal information about me, my current relationship status, and several aspects about my college career. I understand this survey will take at the most 15 minutes to complete. Also I am aware that my participation in this study is totally voluntary and if I feel uncomfortable with any aspect of the survey I may choose to discontinue the survey and withdrawal from the study without any penalty or prejudice.

I understand that the information obtained from this survey will be kept confidential and no personal information about me (including my name, any demographic information, and G.P.A) or any answers given will be disclosed in the final results. The results will be used for educational services in order to better future generations of society in general.

I will not hesitate to contact the experimenters regarding any questions I may have in the future. I verify that I am at least 18 years of age or older.

(Signature of participant)

(Date)

(Signature of researcher obtaining consent)

(Date)

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APPENDIX B
Additional Consent

I _____ give my consent to have my cumulative grade point average verified by the experimenter's instructor and presented to the experimenters anonymously. I also comprehend that once the experiment has been completed all records concerning my grade point average will be destroyed accordingly.

Finally I recognize that if at any point in time I feel stressed or concerned over this issue I can contact the experimenter and express these concerns or questions.

Participant's Signature _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Signature _____ Date: _____

Student ID # or SSN: _____

(SSN # is needed for the researcher's instructor to get correct G.P.As regarding participants.)

APPENDIX C
SURVEY

SUBJECT ID NUMBER: _____ (Assigned by Researcher)

9) Are you MALE FEMALE?

10) Are you involved in a romantic relationship (defined as dating, engaged, boyfriend/girlfriend) at this point in time?

 YES NO (skip to #8)

11) How long have you been in this relationship?

12) Rate the level of commitment in your relationship

 1 2 3 4
Not committed somewhat committed committed very committed

13) Rate the level of stress in your relationship

 1 2 3 4
no stress somewhat stressed stressed very stressed

14) Do you feel a relationship is related to the level or outcome of your academics? If yes, please explain.

15) What factors in your relationship (dating, engaged, boyfriend/girlfriend) do you believe play a role in your academics?

16) What grade level are you:

FRESHMAN SOPHOMORE JUNIOR SENIOR OTHER/UNKOWN

17) What is your current G.P.A (Cumulative)?

10) For those not in a relationship, do you think that if you were in a relationship, would it relate to your academics?

Authors Note

This research project would not have been possible without the assistance and guidance provided by several different individuals.

First, we would like to thank the IRB board for their helpful comments and assistance in regards to our IRB proposal.

Next, we would like to offer an additional thank you to Dr. Bruce B. Kelly for taking time out of his busy schedule and allowing us to distribute surveys in his classes. He was incredibly sweet and even offered us to survey another one of his classes when we were unable to gain the sample size we wanted

In addition to those individuals, we would also like to thank the participants who signed up from the Human Subject Pool. We would not have been able to collect any of our data without you.

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