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IMPROVING PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF THE FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS

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PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Improving psychological and emotional well-being of the first-year college students

Dyan Robinson* & Olcay Yavuz

Abstract: Almost half of the students who begin college are not retained at the institution in which they began. The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of first-year college students to improve their psychological and emotional well-being. This quantitative study utilized the College Student Mentoring Scale that includes two interrelated constructs which are, Psychological and Emotional Support and The Existence of a Role Model. The research found that multiple factors impact first-year students' perceptions of their psychological and emotional well-being. Additional findings indicated that response levels were highest for The Existence of a Role Model. It is the intention that this study will add to the somewhat limited research on improving the psychological and emotional well-being of first-year college students in higher education. Also, it will assist in future policies and practices by providing a foundation of the components that influence first-year student success through improving the effectiveness of peer mentoring programs.

Keywords: psychological needs; emotional well-being; first-year college students

Academic ability is not the only predictor of student success. Social support from peer mentors is represented in previous literature and a contributor, to first-year student persistence (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012). Student experiences that are shared (Tinto, 1995) are influential in improving the transition to college and support the probability of students reaching graduation (Goff, 2011). First-year students confront social, academic, and psychological challenges during this transition. This includes pressures to persist academically, become involved on campus, and explore social groups, and for the first time, cope with being away from loved ones, each of which can lead to attrition. Retaining students then becomes a fundamental priority of institutions. It is up to university leadership to look at innovative programming that will help address the roadblocks that prevent first-year students from persisting and finding success at their institutions.

Some program initiatives focus on the influence peers have on the success of first-year students. Researchers, (Campbell, Smith, Dugan, & Komives, 2012; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996) have explored students' social environment, the need for emotional and psychological support, making campus connections and the influence peers have on student performance.

This research re-examined such initiatives by focusing on the perceptions of first-year students and the impact peer mentors have on their success in college. This study contributes relevant data for further research and provides recommendations to university leadership regarding peer mentoring programs, leading first-year student persistence.



In order for this achievement to occur, it is vital to thoroughly understand the role of peer mentors, what their purpose is and how they are utilized to aid the progression of first-year students.

1. Literature review

1.1. Peer mentors and first-year students

Aronson and Bridgeman (1979, as cited in Falchikov, 2001) indicate peer mentors may not only support students academically, but they are often a preference of first-year students over faculty on everyday concerns and issues. First-year students reach out to peer mentors on areas of their lives that cause stress, confusion, and insecurities. In fact, students that seek to connect with more experienced peers experience improved motivation, increased overall satisfaction, and an increase in positive attitudes toward themselves.

Budge (2006) also suggests peer mentors and faculty must understand the availability of resources offered on campus and recognize when referrals are necessary to meet the needs of students. Diversity training is important for peer mentors and faculty in addition to discussions on inclusion (Ferrari, 2004).

Budge (2006) suggests that programs which are more transparent about their responsibility to supporting diverse populations are likely to help their students find success. Faculty and peer mentor relationships are important in order to address the needs of the students they interact with. However, the literature dictates that the peer-to-peer relationship can be a strong influence that can support the Psychological and Emotional Support of the first-year student (Krumrei-Mancuso, Newton, Kim, & Wilcox, 2013).

1.2. Psychological and emotional support

The terms psychological health and emotional health are used interchangeably. Both psychological and emotional health can be considered as a domain of mental health that influences individuals' thoughts and actions. However, it is important to notice that psychological health and emotional health have different meanings. American Psychological Association (APA) (2021) uses the definition of psychological health that is developed by Jahoda (1953). Based on this definition, psychological health can be characterized by a reasonable and continuous finding of satisfaction in one's living and utilization of a problem-solving mode of behavior. On the other hand, emotional health can be defined as having both an awareness of emotions and the ability to manage and express those feelings in an appropriate manner (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015).

Therefore, psychological, mental health and peer relationships are important to the success of college students. These are a sense of identity, social engagement, emotional adjustment, and goal setting (Lapsley, Rice, & Fitzgerald, 1990). While others (Rodriguez et al., 2003) found that peer support is highly related to the psychological and emotional well-being of college students; suggesting that peers are more equipped for providing resources on both academic and social needs to students.

Chatham-Carpenter et al. (2014) discussed that traditionally, student success has been heavily assessed by what happens in a classroom and eventually the grade a student receives in a course. They looked at freshmen enrolled in first-year-only sections of a general education class which included a peer mentor who established relationships with students and instructors and compared the retention to a non-first-year section. Peer mentors worked with students and instructors to promote student success both in and out of the classroom to support the student holistically and not just a grade earned in the class. Tinto (2012) continues to find support for paired learning by acknowledging the structure learning communities provide. This then positions students well for academic and social



support. Therefore, universities implementing innovative programming can benefit from the addition of peer mentoring and classroom or learning communities.

Feeling supported and connected leads to positive feelings, which could motivate the student to stay engaged and involved in their learning experience. Finding support from other students along with engaged instructors can create a needed connection that may be essential for student success and retention (Webber, Krylow, & Zhang, 2013). The impact of a successful peer mentor program can then become a movement in promoting inclusion, diversity, and social justice. In their work on peer mentoring programs, Leidenfrost, Strassnig, Schabmann, Spiel, and Carbon (2011) displayed positive effects for mentees. They shared that first-year students show better academic performance and social integration. They state that undoubtedly, peer mentors make an impact on the success of first-year students.

Beltman and Schaeben (2012) suggest that student success can be interpreted in different ways; however, institutions of higher education often equate success with retention. Effective peer mentor programs have characteristics that are key indicators in retention efforts. They have assisted first-year students in their transition to college, have allowed them to gain a sense of belonging, and helped students develop communication and organizational skills (2012). These characteristics become key indicators in retention efforts. Tinto (2006) adds that when looking at alternative models to increase retention, involvement and engagement matter the most. Hall (2007) found peer mentors, as opposed to faculty provide a more supportive environment, provide essential resources and help first-year students deal with stress.

Beginning college requires students to confront multiple transitions, including changes in their living arrangements, academic environments, and friendship circles, while adapting to greater independence and responsibility in their personal and academic lives. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, one-third of entering college students do not continue or leave before finishing their degree, and a high percentage leave during their first academic year (Bradburn & Carroll, 2002). Thus, it is pivotal to understand factors that impact a successful adjustment within the first year of college (Pratt, 2000). Two considerations that have been overlooked but may potentially contribute to better adjustment in college students during their freshman year include a sense of belonging to the campus community (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002) and the value of their friendships (Fass & Tubman, 2002). Some researchers have suggested that the level of association that the student feels toward the institution (i.e., university attachment) is linked to better social adjustment (Tao, Dong, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer, 2000), less depressive symptoms, higher academic motivation, and lower attrition rates (Beyers & Goossens, 2002).

When students transition into college, a variety of changes take place. As students enter their emerging adulthood, which by definition is a period of instability and exploration during which they must adjust to an unfamiliar environment that consists of different academic and social relationships, identity explorations, and possible changes in self-concept (Arnett, 2007). While many influences impact the adjustment to college, Swenson, Nordstrom, and Hiester (2008) looked at peer relationships to see how those relationships affect the adjustment to college.

Erickson's theory of psychosocial development suggests the major development tasks of the early 20's is to form close intimate relationships (Erikson, 1963). Given the importance of peers during this time, the researchers expected friends to play an important role in the transition to college (Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008). In the context of school, peer relationships can sway student development and can influence students' satisfaction with an institution (Astin, 1993 as cited in Swenson, Nordstrom, & Heister, 2008). Previous research has shown that there is a significant link between the quality of peer relationships and the transition to school. Consequently, greater friendship quality was associated with greater emotional adjustment (Demir & Urber, 2004 as cited in Swenson; Nordstrom & Heister, 2008).



In their own research Swenson, Nordstrom, and Heister (2008) found when focusing on social support, the greater the support received, the better was the emotional adjustment (e.g., less anxiety, the better quality of life). Furthermore, their results indicated that increased social support over the first year of college predicted higher levels of social and emotional/personal adjustment (Swenson, Nordstrom, & Heister, 2008). These conclusions highlighted encouraging associations between peer attachment and academic, social, and emotional/personal adjustment among emerging adults, as is found in between college peers, and parents and teenage children. They found that measures of friendship quality and peer attachment among college friends would consistently yield positive correlations with all forms of adjustments. When all research findings are taken into the consideration, it can be concluded that the psychological and emotional support college students receive during their transition to higher education can help the progression to find success and degree completion.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

This quantitative study employed a descriptive and correlational research design. Quantitative data was collected from the College Student Mentoring Scale survey (Crisp, 2009). The rationale for using a correlational research design is, there is a need to determine the extent of a relationship between two or more variables (Creswell, 2013). These variables are Psychological and Emotional Support, Degree and Career Support, academic and knowledge support, and the Existence of a Role Model. This design was appropriate for this study because it (a) looked at the relationship between the variables - not past or future performance of participants, (b) the data was collected at one point in time, (c) all participants' responses were analyzed as a group and (d) finally, the researcher made interpretations from the statistical test results (Creswell, 2013).

This study was guided by the following research questions.

1. What are the perceptions of college freshmen related to Psychological and Emotional Support received by a peer mentor during their first semester?
2. What are the perceptions of college freshmen related to the Existence of a Role Model as received by a peer mentor?

2.2. Setting and participants

This study was conducted at a public, state, four-year institution located in an urban community. The university is a fully accredited institution of higher education. Based on the institutional archived data, the total student population was around 7,000. There were over 1,387 first-year students. The population that was invited to participate in this study consisted of new college freshmen who were enrolled in a freshmen seminar course which included a peer mentor in each section of the course. The First-Year Experience (FYE) coordinates the freshmen seminar course for all new, incoming first-year students. The FYE program at the institution frequently collects data to assess program initiatives to better serve its first-year students. The FYE program uses electronic communication with first-year students to deploy surveys and other assessment tools several times a semester. This study utilized and analyzed existing data from the FYE program which was collected. A total of 710 students participated with 266 completing the survey and became the convenience sample for the study.

The respondents were 32.3% male and 67.7% female. The race of the respondents was 20.3% Black/African American, 55.4% White/Caucasian, 16.5% Hispanic/Latino, 3.8% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 6.0% responded "other". The percentage of students living on campus was 57.1% on-campus and 42.9% commuter students. Furthermore, 39.5% were first-generation students. Regarding the Peer Mentor gender, 15.8% of students reported having a male peer mentor and 84.2% reported having a female peer mentor.

2.3. Data collection instruments

2.3.1. College Student Mentoring Scale (CSMS)

The College Student Mentoring Scale is a 25-item survey designed to measure students' perceptions of mentoring support they receive during college (Crisp, 2009). This survey was used as the main data collection tool. An email was sent to the creator of the CSMS asking to use the survey in this study. Permission was received by email before the survey was implemented and distributed to the participants. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was also received by the researcher.

In this study, the survey specifically measures two types of interrelated constructs: (1) Psychological and Emotional Support, (2) and the Existence of a Role Model. Each domain addresses one of four interrelated constructs mentioned above and is described as follows. Participants were instructed to rate responses to questions by indicating "5"-strongly agree, "4" – agree, "3" – neutral, "2" – disagree and "1" – strongly disagree.

In this study, Psychological and Emotional Support and Existence of Role Model questions from CSMS are analyzed. The Psychological and Emotional Support domain encompasses a sense of listening, providing moral and emotional support, identifying problems, and providing encouragement as well as the establishment of a supportive relationship in which there is mutual understanding and link between the student and the mentor. The second construct concentrated on the presence of a role model in the student's life as well as the opportunity for the student to learn from the mentor's current and past actions, as well as achievements and failures.

2.3.1.1. Validity and reliability of the instrument

The College Student Mentoring Scale was used to collect data (Crisp, 2009). The construct, content, and face validity of the survey was evaluated, and questions were analyzed by professionals in the university FYE program and determined to be suitable for distribution. Crisp's (2009) CSMC has been utilized due to its strong face and construct validity across four sub-scale domains that are each independent factor for perceptions of college students. The expert panels in FYE are used when specialized input and opinion regarding the survey. Therefore, based on the expert panel that includes a certified school counselor, university professors, and professionals in the FYE program, this survey measures the concept that it's intended to measure (a very high construct validity. It is also noted that it is fully representative of what it aims to measure (content validity).

The internal consistency of the items measuring each of the four constructs was established by calculating Cronbach coefficient alphas. Cronbach coefficient alphas for each of the latent variables were found to be substantial (i.e., greater than .70). The value of coefficient alpha for Psychological and Emotional Support was .912, indicating the factor was highly reliable. Substantial reliability results for latent variables were also found for Degree and Career Support ($\alpha = .903$), Academic Subject Knowledge Support ($\alpha = .883$), and the Existence of a Role Model ($\alpha = .845$). The items measuring each of the four constructs were found to be reliable, indicating the participants respond consistently across the items designed to measure the four latent constructs.

2.4. Variables and coding

The independent variables (demographic factors) and dependent variables (two domains, i.e., Psychological and Emotional Support, and the Existence of a Role Model) are analyzed according to the research questions. The dependent variables (two domains, i.e., Psychological and Emotional Support and the Existence of a Role Model) are measured according to the perceived impact of peer mentoring utilizing the CSMS.

To determine the minimum and maximum score for each domain the number of questions was multiplied by the given response to the survey question. For the area of Psychological and Emotional Support, a total of eight questions were

asked on a scale of 1-5, with (1) being a low score and (5) being the highest score. Therefore, the minimum score for Psychological and Emotional Support is 8 and the maximum score is 40. The second domain, the Existence of a Role Model has a total of 6 questions, therefore the minimum score is 6 and the maximum score is 30.

The independent variables that have possible implications on students' perception of the impact of peer mentors are summarized in Table 1, which illustrates the independent variables and coding. The variables used to look at the impact are student, gender, race, campus resident, first-generation college students, High School GPA, and peer mentor gender. The researcher chose these specific variables to highlight as a particular interest of the impact of these variables may influence the future recruitment efforts of peer mentoring programs. Moreover, it is the interest of the researcher to understand if these variables have an impact on the mentoring experience from both the mentee and the mentor.

Additionally, first-generation college students more frequently encounter specific obstacles that compromise their academic success as compared to non-first-generation students. Peer mentoring programs have demonstrated their effectiveness with first-generation students and other historically underserved student groups, often pairing upper-class students with entering first-year students (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Wilson & Arendale, 2011 as cited in Stebleton & Soria, 2013). For these reasons, the researcher will focus on the impact of these specific demographic areas on college freshmen perceptions.

Table 1. Independent variables

Variable	Coding
Student Gender	Male =1 Female =2 Other =3
Student Race	Black/African American =1, White/Caucasian=2, Hispanic/Latino=3, Asian/Pacific Islander=4
Student Campus Resident	Yes=1, No=2
First Generation College Student	Yes=1, No=2
High School GPA	0 - 5.0
Peer Mentor Gender	Male=0, Female=1, Other=2

2.5. Analysis

The research design and methods for this study derived from existing data collection which employs quantitative research methods to evaluate the impact of peer mentoring on first-year college students. Aligned with the research questions, the quantitative data was collected and analyzed to determine the impact peer mentors have on first-year student success, particularly, in the areas of Psychological and Emotional Support and the Existence of a Role Model, and the total mentoring score. High numbers/values were used for a score of "5" and low numbers were used to code "1". The responses were uploaded into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis.

Descriptive statistics were run for each of the questions. In addition, high and low responses for each along with comparisons were evaluated. Frequency distribution is a count of the number of times each score on a single variable occurs. Frequencies and measures of central tendency (mean and standard deviation) were calculated by SPSS and appropriate tables were created for all items on the CSMS.

Inferential statistics for relationships among peer mentoring and the four domains of the CSMS were used. To explore the impact of the factors Multiple Linear Regression (MLR) was used as the main statistical test conducted. The purpose of MLR is to investigate the extent to which a single continuous dependent (criterion) variable is predicted

by several continuous or categorical independent (predictor) variables. For example, this study examined the relationship between Psychosocial and Emotional Support (dependent variable) and gender, race, and first-generation students (independent variables) to see if each has an impact on the domain. The assumptions of MLR including linearity, reliability of measurement, homoscedasticity, and normality were tested. Since the number of participants (N) is 266, this meets the appropriate sample size to conduct MLR. This study also used other inferential statistics such as independent t-test as needed when the data warranted further investigation.

For each research question, descriptive statistics, multiple linear regression, and an independent t-test were run. This allowed the researcher to establish mean scores, high and low responses related to the mean of each dependent variable. Following the descriptive statistics, multiple linear regression was run for each research question. Additional inferential statistics were run by way of an independent t-test for each research question. This allowed the researcher to compare the two means for factors that potentially impact the dependent variable.

3. Findings

3.1. Psychological and emotional support

For research question one, the researcher asked, what are the perceptions of college freshmen related to Psychological and Emotional Support received by a peer mentor during their first semester? The participant response for Psychological and Emotional Support was high, $M=4.15$ ($SD=.84$). This indicated that the perceptions college freshmen had on the Psychological and Emotional Support provided by a peer mentor was positive and showed strong support.

Additionally, the researcher identified three areas lower than the total mean score which indicated the participants felt less support from their peer mentor. The items on the survey that fell below the mean were, "I can talk openly about personal issues" $M=4.11$ ($SD=1.04$). The next was "gives me emotional support" $M=4.05$ ($SD=1.04$) and lastly, "encourages me to talk about problems in my social life" $M=3.89$ ($SD=1.09$). The researcher also noted that at least three questions had elevated responses which ranked higher than the total mean. The first, "makes me feel like I belong" $M=4.25$ ($SD=.91$), the second "expresses confidence in my ability" $M=4.26$ ($SD=.91$), and the third, "can talk openly" $M=4.28$ ($SD=.97$) all indicated the participants felt the peer mentor provided higher support in the area of emotional and social support. Table 2 represents results for the questions of Psychological and Emotional Support.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for psychological and emotional support (n=266)

<i>When in College, I have had a Peer Mentor who...</i>	Mean	Std. Deviation
Can talk openly with	4.28	.97
Expresses confidence in my ability	4.26	.91
Makes me feel like I belong	4.25	.91
Encourages me to use him/her as a sounding board	4.21	.96
Recognizes my academic accomplishments	4.16	1.04
Total Mean Score	4.15	.84
I can talk openly about personal issues	4.11	1.04
Gives me emotional support	4.05	1.04

Encourages me to talk about problems in my social life

3.89

1.09

The researcher then asked, what factors impact the perception of college freshmen as related to Psychological and Emotional Support received by a peer mentor? The data were initially analyzed by utilizing simultaneous multiple regression analysis. As there is not any specified priority among the predictor variables all of them were entered into the equation at the same time by using IBM SPSS. According to the results of the F-test (ANOVA) and Model Summary data, the total model was not significant, $R^2 = .02$, $F(7, 258) = 1.07$, $p > .05$. As evident by the results provided in Table 3, all seven predictor variables were not significantly contributing to the prediction of the criterion variable which is Psychological and Emotional Support.

Table 3. Regression analysis summary for variables predicting psychological and emotional support

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>
Race	.093	.11	.05	8.88
HS GPA	.18	.14	.08	1.29
Gender	.10	.11	.06	.92
Campus Resident	.11	.10	.06	1.04
First gen	.09	.11	.05	.80
Peer Mentor	-.06	.14	-.02	-.41

Note. $R^2 = .028$ ($n = 266$)

After reviewing the results from the multiple linear regression, the researcher found High School GPA was closest to showing significance. The researcher then looked further into this factor which was analyzed by conducting an independent t-test to investigate if High School GPA had a significant impact on student perceptions as it pertains to Psychological and Emotional Support.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare Psychological and Emotional Support with High School GPA at-risk level and HSGPA at the higher-performing level. There was a significant difference in the scores for at-risk students ($M = 3.95$, $SD = .82$) and for higher-performing students ($M = 4.20$, $SD = .84$) conditions; $t(264) = -1.98$, $p = .04$. Additionally, the effect size as measured by d was 0.04, a value that can be considered small. Therefore, the researcher can conclude that although small, there is a difference between participants who came into college with an at-risk GPA and students with a higher-performing GPA. Moreover, it can be said that those differences result in a difference of perceptions as it pertains to the support given by a peer mentor in the area of Psychological and Emotional Support.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for psychological and emotional support by high school GPA

HS GPA		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Psychological Emotional Support	At-risk	56	3.95	.82
	Higher-Performing	210	4.20	.84

3.2. The existence of a role model

Similarly, research question four explored the perceptions of participants in the area of the Existence of a Role Model regarding their peer mentor. The total mean for this topic was high, $M=4.27$ ($SD=.79$). Therefore, it could be inferred that student perceptions are very favorable to the impact peer mentors have on first-year student success in the area of the Existence of a Role Model. The researcher found that out of the six items, only two items fell below the mean, indicating that students' opinions were not as strong for those questions. These questions were "I admire" $M=4.23$ ($SD=1.00$) and "I want to copy their behaviors as they relate to college-going" $M=3.96$ ($SD=1.05$). On the contrary, four items were positioned higher than the mean. The researcher found this to be noteworthy as it suggests a greater level of impact on more items than less in the area of The Existence of a Role Model.

Suggesting that participants had more assurance in the Existence of a Role Model from their peer mentor. The first of the four questions were slightly above the mean, "shares personal examples of difficulties they have overcome" $M=4.28$ ($SD=.92$). The second question, "I look up to regarding college-related issues" was aligned fairly close to the first, $M=4.29$ ($SD=.93$). Furthermore, the question "sets a good example about how to relate to other people" started to show the separation from the mean to a more elevated response $M=4.30$ ($SD=.88$). Lastly, the fourth question, "serves as a model for how to be successful in college" showed the highest level of support for first-year students' perception on the impact of success in the areas of the Existence of a Role Model, $M=4.40$ ($SD=.87$). Table 5 highlights these questions and where they stand concerning the total mean.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for the existence of a role model ($n=266$)

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Serves as a model for how to be successful in college	4.40	.87
Sets a good example about how to relate to other people	4.30	.88
I look up to regarding college-related issues	4.29	.93
Shares personal examples of difficulties they have overcome	4.28	.92
Total Mean	4.27	.79
I admire	4.23	1.00
I want to copy their behaviors as they relate to college-going	3.96	1.05

Once more, the researcher explored which of the six factors impact the perception of college freshmen as related to the Existence of a Role Model. For consistency, the researcher analyzed the data utilizing multiple linear regression which was entered into SPSS. Table 6 highlights the results of the F-test (ANOVA) and Model Summary data, which was not significant, $R^2 = .02$, $F(7, 258) = .91$, $p < .05$. Moreover, all six predictor variables were not significantly contributing to the area of the Existence of a Role Model.

Table 6. Regression analysis summary for variables predicting the existence of a role model

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>
Race	.05	.10	.03	.53
HS GPA	.12	.12	.06	.98
Gender	.16	.10	.09	1.53
Campus Resident	.07	.10	.04	.76
First Gen student	.03	.10	.02	.36
Peer mentor	-.08	.13	-.04	-.63

Note. $R^2 = .02$ ($n=266$)

After reviewing the results from the multiple linear regression, the researcher found the student gender variable was bordering significance. Further research into this factor was analyzed by conducting an independent t-test to investigate if participants' gender had a significant impact on perceptions as it pertains to the Existence of a Role Model received by the peer mentor.

Table 7 represents results from an independent-samples t-test that was conducted to compare the Existence of a Role Model with the participants' gender. The researcher found a significant difference in the scores for male students ($M=4.13$, $SD=.75$) and for female students ($M=4.33$, $SD=.81$) conditions; $t(266) = -1.88$, $p = .05$. Additionally, the effect size as measured by d was 0.01, a value that can be considered small. The researcher understands that although small, there is evidence of a difference between the male and female groups, indicating that the participants' gender does make a difference when considering perceptions of support received by peer mentors in for the Existence of a Role Model. In this domain female students, ($M=4.33$, $SD = .81$) had higher perceptions of a peer mentors' impact on student success as compared to male students ($M=4.13$, $SD=.75$).

Table 7. Descriptive statistics for the existence of a role model by student gender

Gender		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Existence of a Role Model	Male	86	4.13	.75
	Female	180	4.33	.81

Note. ($n=266$, $p^* < .05$)

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study is to explore the mentee's perspective of each domain of the College Student Mentoring Scale. The significant findings were reported in the previous chapter. This discussion section moves beyond the results to provide implications and recommendations for future policy and practice. The researcher starts by addressing the research questions posed in the study including a comparison of the findings of the study to prior research followed by implications for future practice, research, and policy. The chapter concludes with limitations followed by concluding remarks.

4.1. Psychological and emotional support

Participants in this study were questioned on statements that highlighted the Psychological and Emotional Support received by a peer mentor and the perceptions of the impact on students' success within this area. These questions focused on encompassing a sense of listening, providing moral and emotional support, identifying problems, and providing encouragement. These questions also concentrated on the establishment of a supportive relationship in which there is a mutual understanding between the student and mentor.

4.2. Cultivating a nurturing and caring environment of psychological and emotional health

This study found first-year student perceptions of Psychological and Emotional Support given by a peer mentor could be categorized into two areas, these were higher rated responses and lower responses. A careful analysis of the data revealed that some questions had a higher perceptive response such as "When in college, I have had a peer mentor who makes me feel like I belong." The higher-level responses aligned with research done by Pittman and Richmond (2008), which found a student's sense of school connectedness contributes to constructs of an individual's perception of fitting in and belonging with others at the same institution. Similarly, Swensen, Nordstrom, and Hiestler (2008) found peer relationships determine the adjustment to college. In this study, participants were first-semester students transitioning into college. Additionally, respondents rated the highest when asked "While in College, I have had a peer mentor with who I can talk openly." Thomas and Hansen (2014) suggest supporting students' growth of identity and social belonging is key to student success and increased feelings of well-being. According to Erickson's theory (1963) of psychological development, individuals in their early twenties are seeking close relationships. Given this, one can speculate how the importance of belonging really becomes essential to first-year college students.

Furthermore, Leidenfrost, Strassnig, Schabmann, Spiel, and Carbon (2011) found the impact of a successful peer mentor program can become a movement in promoting inclusion, diversity, and social justice. In their work, peer mentors had positive effects on mentees. Leidenfrost et al (2011), saw that first-year students show better academic performance and social integration. Backed by the findings in this study, undoubtedly, peer mentors make an impact on the success of first-year students.

Parallel with the literature, the peer mentors in this study participate in a training and ongoing semester-long course which prepares and guides them through making first-year students feel included and that they have a place in which they belong. They do this by attending social events with students and managing interactive social media platforms, such as group chats. This allows first-year students to connect with peer mentors and other students outside of class. Therefore, it is understood why respondents in this study would rate these questions higher.

First-year students are embarking on a new journey. It is important for their psychological and emotional health that their university, instructors, and peers cultivate a nurturing and caring environment to assist in this transitional time. Since students indicated they have had a peer mentor with who they can talk openly, this can be considered as a good example of cultivating a nurturing and caring environment of psychological and emotional health through providing a peer mentor who makes them feel like they belong.



4.3. Challenges peer mentors face in addressing psychological and emotional support

It can be a challenge for peer mentors to address the Psychological and Emotional Support first-year students need. The literature review points to how the role of the peer mentor can be more than just an academic leader. Research by Swenson, Nordstrom, and Heister (2008) found when focusing on social support, the greater the support received, the better the emotional adjustment (e.g., less anxiety, the better quality of life). Although supported relatively high in this study, statements such as "When in College, I have had a peer mentor who gives me emotional support and encourages me to talk about problems in my social life" were less favored in the findings. While the responses were not drastically lower for these questions, the researcher finds it important to note that they were the lowest-rated questions in this domain. From a programming perspective, it would be advantageous to incorporate more social integration in the peer mentor training that addresses such areas. Research by Bowles, and Jones (2003) shows that to provide holistic support to the mentees, the whole person must be looked at. Of course, this does not mean that a peer mentor should take the place of professionals in the areas of counseling and support, but they can be part of an early warning system to campus leaders and officials if mentees express more of the emotional and social struggles they are experiencing especially in the first-transitional semester.

4.4. Understanding the impact of high school GPA on first-year student's experiences

Understanding the impact first-year students High School GPA has on their college experience can be a pivotal factor in program implementation and meeting the needs of students. Colleges and universities are now seeing an increase in non-traditional, first-generation, and underprepared/at-risk student populations (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Historically, institutions of higher education lack the accommodations and programming for these populations (Visser and Zyl, 2013). In this study, a Multiple Linear Regression was run to determine which factors (race, High School GPA, gender, campus resident, first-generation student and, gender of a peer mentor.) impact the student's perception. There was no significant finding with this analysis. However, further investigation into High School GPA found that students that were considered at-risk (lower High School GPA coming into college) had lower perceptions of the level of influence a peer mentor has on success.

Moreover, students who performed at-level/higher level in high school showed higher responses in their perception of support from peer mentors. Consequently, The National Center for Educational Statistics reported approximately one-third of students entering college leave higher education without completing and obtaining a degree. Most do so within the first academic year. O'Keeffe (2013) suggests that adapting to a range of learners enhances a dynamic academic experience. For some students that fall into the at-risk categories, the outside academic responsibilities they have may play a role in their success. These include family and work responsibilities that may hinder them from becoming connected to peers in school and their campus community.

Therefore, this population (at-risk students identified in high school) becomes important for leadership in higher education to recognize when beginning and implementing new first-year initiatives. It would be beneficial for leaders in higher education to understand these students better, so they do not slip through the academic cracks. These students require more university resources than any other to ensure success. Furthermore, if university leadership is aware of circumstances for at-risk populations, resources could be directed toward facilitating programming for increasing student success.

Following recommendations from Thomas and Hansen (2014) shifting leadership tactics in higher education to initiatives that provide support for students, to programming that embraces engagement with students can change the outcome for this population. Changing the focus from traditional instrumental support, such as study skills to



address deficits in academic performance to a more holistic approach aimed at enhancing student integration within the university community, provides the student with greater opportunity for success (Bowles & Jones, 2003).

Fortunately, the participants in this study are part of a program in a university that sees itself as an institution of access. Resources are available to peer mentors who work with first-year students to improve their success rates at the university. Peer mentors are trained on the resources available and can identify when a student may benefit from using them. By providing first-year students a variety of ways to connect to their campus, this university becomes an important partner with the student with the main focus being a success.

5. Implications for leadership, policy, and practice to improve psychological and emotional support

The results from this study highlight the importance of university leaders and campus partners to understand the demographics of the students entering the institution. First-year instructors and peer mentors can then focus and direct programming to address the needs of students holistically. Therefore, additional work should be done in this regard to instilling leadership in peer mentors so that they are vested in making strong impacts on other students. For instance, this study indicated that students entering college with a lower High School GPA and considered at-risk perceive the support of a peer mentor less impactful than those who transitioned in with higher GPAs. This is critical information for leaders in higher education to understand. These findings aligned with the researcher's assumption that High School GPA can be a predictor of students' perceptions in college. These results impact implications for policy and practice in the area of Psychological and Emotional Support.

From a policy standpoint, literature by Goff (2011) suggests first-year students encounter social-emotional struggles, such as finding peer groups to fit in with which can lead to feelings of isolation. University officials, administrators in both academic and student affairs, deans, and faculty need to be aware of student needs now than ever before. Moreover, if policymakers generate university programming that looks to address student stressors, the need to belong and connectedness from the time students declare acceptance to the institution, in some cases at orientations and open house events (Harrison, 2006), student success outcomes become more accessible. The university used in this study provides a comprehensive training program for peer mentors focusing on procedures to follow should a student be in distress. However, it cannot be left to student leaders alone to address the evolving complexities of first-year students. University policy-makers can address the changing dynamics that make up the first-year student and create programming for students to get involved and become part of the college community. Most of the time it is left to student-run clubs and organizations that recruit members from venues such as involvement fairs. For students who are feeling stressed, or like they do not fit in, they can be missed. Further research should be done to address how university leadership can create new ways to incorporate the need to belong into their campus programming.

From a practice perspective, this study highlights the need to develop meaningful connections for first-year students who had a peer mentor in their first semester of college. As indicated in research by Kezar and Moriarty (2000), there is a need for student affairs administrators to reconsider key assumptions about leadership development models and practices, so that traditionally underserved (at-risk) students, in particular, will get resources and attention from peer mentors that assume leadership roles. This study revealed that the at-risk respondents have a less favorable perception as it pertains to the influence of peer mentors. Peer mentors then, should become champions for these students advocating to change the way university officials view their demographics based on high school performance. Given adequate resources and availability provided by a peer mentor, this population of first-year students can reverse those lower perceptions. In this case, actions speak louder than words. If university leaders and student leaders show students their success matters by participating in experiences with them, those lower perceptions can be turned into positive exchanges.



From a leadership perspective, it is imperative to understand the stressors and challenges students are coming into college with. For many, this is the first time away from home, and finding their own identities, and separating from what was the norm in high school. Additionally, the comforts of being in a friend group from towns and communities is now a thing of the past. Leaders need to understand this. It now becomes a community effort to transition these students into higher education with the intent always being to address their needs holistically. If leaders in higher education can stay current on the psychological and emotional needs of students, then the path to student success can be attainable.

5.1. The existence of a role model

The last area of the survey that is integrated on the College Student Mentoring Scale is the Existence of a Role Model. This area focuses on the presence of a role model in the student's life as well as the opportunity for the student to learn from the mentor's current and past actions, as well as achievements and failures. The questions are designed to measure the presence of a role model.

5.2. Looking up to peers as examples

At the core of this study is the notion that peer mentors represent leadership and emulate qualities that are represented by a role model. In fact, they are indeed role models. As the section title suggests, first-year students are looking up to their peer mentors and consider their behavior, academic achievements, and advice as examples and seek to model those characteristics.

There were six questions on the survey related to qualities of a role model. Out of the six, four of the questions were rated highly. These questions asked, "When in college I have had a peer mentor who, served as a model for how to be successful in college and sets a good example about how to relate to other people." Other statements were, "When in college I have had a peer mentor who I look up to regarding college-related issues and shares personal examples of difficulties they have overcome." The research indicates student motivation is related to role modeling and finding connections with individuals who are similar and comfortable with the environment. Additionally, first-year students performed better academically when they receive attention from their peers (Roksa & Whitley, 2017).

According to Klasen and Clutterbuck (2012), an effective mentor is respectful, reliable, patient, trustworthy, and a very good listener and communicator. Along with those qualities they should acquire several skills and abilities to be an effective peer mentor. These include self-awareness, goal clarity and flexibility. Other attributes include patience, self-confidence and ability to encourage others. Successful peer mentoring can be beneficial to the university. In recent years, peer mentoring has become a means of promoting student success. Mentoring in any form, formal or informal, becomes a relational experience for first-year students especially, which eases the transition between high school and college (Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintron, 2007). In this study, peer mentors are recommended for this role. They are students that are referred by faculty and by other student leaders. They are academically sound, maintaining a GPA of a 3.0 or better. They are expected to attend 75 % of the first-year seminar course and they take a semester long peer mentor course on top of their normal course load. It is evident these peer mentors invoke all the qualities a mentor should possess.

5.3. First-year students goal-seeking through the help of peer mentors

Although responses for this area were high, two statements were slightly lower than the others, the statements were more interpersonally focused which may explain the dip in response. These questions asked, "While in college I have had a peer mentor who I admire, and I want to copy their behavior as they relate to college-going." It is noted in the literature that peer mentors are more than just experienced students answering questions but rather, they provide a



high level of support that promotes a positive and caring community (Husband & Jacobs, 2009). Research has also shown that peer mentors can influence better behavior both academically and socially (Ehrich, Hansford, and Tennet, 2004). Peer mentors can make a difference.

The participants in the study did score peer mentors high enough in the area, signifying that they perceive them as beneficial and important role models during their time in higher education. To this point, Aronson and Bridgeman (1979, as cited in Falchikov, 2001) state peer mentors not only support first-year students academically but more and more often they are the preferred contact over faculty on everyday concerns and insecurities. Furthermore, first-year students look to connect more with experienced peers and in turn improve motivation, overall satisfaction and have an increased positive attitude toward themselves. Thus, the title of this section suggests that first-year students are looking to achieve their goals with the assistance of peer mentors. Moreover, it shows peer mentors are in fact having an impact on students and are providing the modeling that will help them toward success.

5.4. Female students perceive peer mentors as role models

Following consistency, a multiple linear regression was run and after further investigation into gender, this factor was analyzed by an independent t-test. In this case, the researcher found a difference in the perceptions female participants had compared to the male students surveyed on the Existence of a Role Model. Sparkman, Maulding, and Roberts (2012) share the student demographics that traditionally find success are female.

The female students in this study rated questions on the survey higher than that of the male participants. Initial interpretations suggest that because there were more female participants the scores for this population would be higher. This is in fact true; however Crisp (2010) found that female and male students experience school differently, suggesting women perceive much more. This is an interesting idea from the literature because it suggests that if male and female students experience college differently, then a further investigation into the differences is needed. Nevertheless, the findings from this study are in alignment with research that implies female students perceive more. Moreover, similar to results in the Academic and Subject Knowledge area, the finding from this current study suggest that female participants have a higher level of perception of how peer mentors impact their success.

5.5. Implications for leadership, policy, and practice for the role modeling

This area is particularly important to university leaders and key stakeholders. From a policy perspective, universities are beginning to realize the potential peer mentoring has on the overall success of the students who attend that institution, specifically, first-year students who struggle with the transition from high school to college. Peer mentors support the university by assisting in the reduction of social exclusion which is especially important to first-year students. Successful peer mentoring programs can help reduce the dropout rate because of the additional support this type of programming offers. Institutions of higher education have identified the need for social support to help facilitate the transition process between high school and college. Many institutions now include such programs to aid students with that transition and embed this type of initiative in First-Year Programs. Leaders in higher education should continue to evaluate programming and address the need for change as it arises. The university for this research frequently collects data from students, peer mentors, faculty, and administrators, which allows for policy change and adjustment as needed.

From a practice standpoint, it is clear from the literature that mentoring and role modeling matter, especially to first-semester students. Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng and DuBois (2008) found that the role of mentors can influence attitudes toward school, satisfaction with the college experience, and looking ahead to potential career choices. They also determined whether or not there are differences in how much mentoring matters across protégé outcomes. In this study, the peer mentors attend 75% of the participants' classes. They are an active part of their classroom



community as well as their point of contact for outside course involvement. Therefore, the more time a peer mentor has with their mentee the greater the likelihood of a stronger connection between the two. Also, this study did not look at the faculty-peer mentor relationship. It would be interesting for key stakeholders to evaluate how much time faculty are allowing peer mentors to address students within each class.

Additionally, sufficient training for peer mentors is essential for them to find success with first-year students. Mentors build positive relationships and their efforts embody positive characteristics that illustrate how learning can be a collaborative and social process. They can also be beneficial in cultivating a sense of community which can essentially have positive results. The peer mentors in this study are enrolled in courses before and during the semester they are assigned to a first-year seminar course. The continuous training and evaluation of how to handle issues and concerns that come up with this population allow peer mentors to be confident in their role which makes the experience for the mentee more rewarding.

From a leadership standpoint, it is key for universities to understand the influence student leaders have on first-year students. The finding shows student leaders who have shown academic achievement, are involved with the campus community, and display motivating strategies for dealing with college are individuals key officials want to tap into. Aronson and Bridgeman (1979, as cited in Falchikov, 2001) found that peer mentors assist with holistically supporting first-year students. First-year students reach out to peer mentors on areas of their lives that cause stress, confusion, and insecurities. Moreover, they learned that students who connect with more experienced peers experience improved motivation, increased overall satisfaction, and an increase in positive attitudes toward themselves. Knowing this information can make a difference for university leaders. Therefore, student leaders can be integrated into first-year programming, initiatives, and strategies that will help with persistence to graduation. This is an exceptional addition to programming efforts and one that is easily accessible to leadership.

Once more, the results of this study found support for gender as having an impact on the Existence of a Role Model. Similar to the previous area, female students had higher responses which again aligned with the researcher's assumption on gender perceptions. This also aligns with the literature that suggests female students view mentoring differently than male students (Crisp, 2010). Therefore, it is noteworthy for leaders implementing practice and policy to pay attention to how many male and female students are enrolled in courses as well as the number of peer mentors are recruited and trained for the program. Then, issues surrounding gender bias could be addressed and peer mentors could learn strategies to engage all students.

6. Conclusion

As with the other areas, the Existence of a Role Model and Psychological Emotional Well-Being are areas that make up the holistic approach for this study. These two are important areas as when they are combined with the others represents the holistic approach so important to student success. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory of Self-Efficacy (1986) speaks to the individual's belief in one's ability; they are motivated to put in the effort and persist to achieve their goals. According to this theory, gender differences, such as attitudes, beliefs, and academic practices demonstrate a difference in motivation and learning performance (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000). Furthermore, this study stresses that while many components contribute to our perceptions, we ultimately can act and react to our behavior and create our self-narrative by adjusting our perceptions.

It is clear from the results of this study that gender is a factor that impacts students' perceptions. At the university in this study, the number of female peer mentors also outweighs the number of male peer mentors. So, if there are more female first-year students and a higher number of female peer mentors, the results of this study correspond with the existing literature on gender differences and perceptions.

Moreover, the most prevalent theorist to the Psychological and Emotional Support domain is Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, (1954). One of the needs called the Love and Belonging Need focuses on feelings of inclusion. The need is relevant and perhaps the most significant for first-year students during the transition from high school to college. As indicated in the literature and this study, first-year students struggle to adjust to newfound independence, meet people and adjust to life on their own. The findings indicate that peer mentors assist first-year students adjust to the transition to college while fulfilling their need of belonging. Moreover, they provide students a comfortable environment to learn and give them a place to express feelings and find connections that are relevant to where they are in their lives.

Finally, results regarding High School GPA and lower scores from respondents in this study connect to the belonging need. Husband and Jacobs (2009) showed peer mentors are being viewed as essential guides to promoting the campus community as positive and caring. Furthermore, peer mentoring can help improve the grades of mentees as well as attendance and behavior (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennet, 2004). Peer mentors in this study check-in with students regularly and attend class with them, so identifying individuals who are isolated and alone can be addressed in an efficient and timely way.

7. Disclosure of conflict

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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