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The year of change: Challenges faced by first year students based on individual identities

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The Year of Change
Challenges Faced by First Year Students Based on Individual Identities

An Honors Program Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Arts and Letters
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
James Madison University

by Holly Karel Millet

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LITERATURE REVIEW	6
New Beginnings: The First Year of College	6
Diversity Among First Year College Students.....	7
The Attrition Problem	8
The Importance of College Climate	9
Influential Social Identities	10
I. Gender and First Year College Students	10
II. Race/Ethnicity and First Year College Students	12
III. Social Class and First Year College Students	14
IV. Sexual Orientation and First Year College Students	15
V. Religious Affiliation and First Year College Students	18
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	21
METHODS.....	22
I. Participants	22
II. Procedures	23
III. Measures	24
RESULTS	27
I. Gender	27
II. Race/Ethnicity.....	29
III. Social Class	31
IV. Sexual Orientation.....	33
V. Religious Affiliation	35
DISCUSSION	38
I. Gender.....	38

II. Race/Ethnicity.....	40
III. Social Class.....	42
IV. Sexual Orientation.....	45
V. Religious Affiliation.....	46
CONCLUSION.....	49
FUTURE IMPLICATIONS.....	50
I. Gender.....	51
II. Race/Ethnicity.....	52
III. Social Class.....	53
IV. Sexual Orientation.....	53
LIMITATIONS.....	54
RESOURCES.....	55

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ABSTRACT

The first year of college is often a fresh start for students. For many, it is the first time away from home where students will have freedom to make their own decisions. During this year students gain new experiences, new knowledge, and a new understanding of themselves. However, it is commonly known that the transition into college is often accompanied by many challenges, including, homesickness, depression, inability to fit in, and financial instability. Often, students' identities can influence the types of challenges they encounter throughout this transition. This study determines correlations between five social identities and challenges that first year students face. These identities are: gender, race/ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation and religious affiliation. In order to explore how these identities influence students' transitions into college, and investigate students' involvement in on-campus organizations that may aid in navigating these challenges, I used both the results of a general survey administered to current undergraduate students at a large, state school in the southeastern United States, which I call Happy Mood University, followed by a focus group session with eleven participants. This study demonstrates that inequalities that exist in the larger culture pertaining to gender, race/ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation pervade into college culture, and thus influence the transition into college for many students. This project helps us understand barriers to integration into college life and offers avenues for change. By determining these correlations, professionals in higher education can address common challenges and provide more successful transitions for first year college students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

New Beginnings: The First Year of College

The first year of college is often a fresh start for students. For many, it is the first time away from home where they will have the freedom to make their own decisions. During this year students gain new experiences, new knowledge, and new understandings of themselves. Many first year students look forward to attending college, as it brings new people, fresh ideas, and new skills into their lives (Simpson & Frost, 1993). However, it is commonly known that the transition into college is often accompanied by challenges as well. The transition from high school to college is “an exceedingly complex phenomenon,” which requires adjustment to a new set of academic and social systems (Terenzini et. al., 1993, pg. 161). Many first year students undergo the most significant changes of their lives while transitioning into college (Simpson & Frost, 1993). The increased personal freedom that occurs during the first year can be experienced as liberating and frightening (Mudhovozi, 2012). Thus, the experience of going to college is complex, and the transition into college life can be loaded with obstacles that may hinder students’ academic success (Watton, 2001).

Research has established two main realms of college life that produce the most stress for first year students as they adjust to the college atmosphere: social and academic (Tinto, 1993). In addition to these two realms, first year students commonly face anticipatory stress while transitioning into college (Gold & Friedman, 2000). This type of stress includes anxieties about the future and fear of the unknown (Earnest & Dwyer, 2010). Some common difficulties faced by first year students are homesickness, friendsickness, depression, psychological disturbance, absent-mindedness, a sense of

isolation, a drop in academic grades, increased interpersonal conflict (Buote et. al., 2007) and other issues related to different aspects of students' social identities. Students must also cope with being separated from parents, siblings, friends, and community members (Buote et. al., 2007).

Astin's (1984) Student Involvement-Theory explains that students who become more involved in various aspects of college life tend to attain more satisfaction with their college experience, and are more likely to complete their degree than students who do not get involved on campus. Astin (1984) defines student involvement as, "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (pg. 518). Thus, to both understand and support students' transition into college, it is important to not only attain information about challenges that are faced, but also to collect data pertaining to involvement on campus.

Diversity Among First Year College Students

The number of students attending universities is steadily increasing around the world (Mudhovozi, 2012). With this increase comes a growth in the diversity of students. Students are entering college with different cultural backgrounds, identities, and skill levels (Rothman et. al., 2011). Diversity has become the hallmark of the college student population (Simpson & Frost, 1993). Higher education was once set aside for the wealthy and elite, however, a college degree has become more accessible for the general public (Rothman et. al., 2011). Between 1995 and 2005, the enrollment of minority students on college campuses has increased by 50 percent (Ryu, 2008). Currently, women outnumber men among college students, and the gender gap is widening (Rothman et. al., 2001; Simpson & Frost, 1993).

Due to the increasing diversity on college campuses, the transition into college is neither static nor universal. Students' transitions into college vary according to their social, familial and education background; personality; educational and occupational orientations and aspirations; the nature and mission of the institution being attended; the kinds of peers, faculty, and staff members encountered; the purpose and nature of those encounters, and the interactions of all of these variables (Terenzini et. al., 1993). Since students experience different challenges, students react in differing ways to pressures that occur throughout their transition (Mudhovozi, 2012).

The Attrition Problem

Despite the increase of students attending colleges, a large population of students is not staying for a second year (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006). Studies demonstrate that 20% to 25% of first year students do not return for a second year at their university (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006) and that 20% to 30% leave the university in following years (Grayson & Grayson, 2003). A potential reason for the high drop out rate could be the difficulties and stressors that are triggered while adjusting to university life (Buote et. al., 2007). Thus, it is imperative that higher education professionals understand the obstacles that first year students face and how to create a successful transition for all first year students. Understanding these concepts is very important, since it is becoming increasingly recognized that adjustment in the first year of college is crucial to the general success of students (Friedlander et. al., 2007). Simpson & Frost (1993) explain that the dynamics of the transition into college can constitute the difference between a positive and a negative college experience.

The Importance of College Climate

Rankin (2005) defines the college climate as, “the cumulative attitudes, behaviors, and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, ability, and potential” (pg. 17). Students’ perceptions of their college climate have a great influence on their transition into their university. These perceptions are related to the college environment, which can impact how the student develops (Astin, 1993). The college environment, defined by Astin (1993), is a combination of four factors: (1) the type of institution in which the student enrolls (large or small, research university or liberal arts college, etc.); (2) the curriculum at the particular university (the required courses and majors offered); (3) the faculty (their attitudes, values, and beliefs as well as their methods of teaching and advising); and (4) the students’ peers (their interests, attitudes, values, and beliefs). Any or all of these factors can impact both cognitive and emotional outcomes for the student (Astin, 1993).

Weidman (1989) explains that a large part of the first year experience includes being socialized into the college atmosphere. This socialization process encompasses learning appropriate social norms, behaviors, and reactions for a student at the specific institution (Padgett et. al., 2010). Weidman (1989) explains that students’ backgrounds and positions in society can impact their socialization, and therefore, “it is necessary to adapt conceptual frameworks to the differing patterns of socialization that may be represented among specific ethnic and gender groups” (Weidman, 1989, pg. 313).

Influential Social Identities

I. Gender and First Year College Students

Since the admission of women into colleges and universities in the 1960's, the percentage of female college students in the US has grown from 38 to 57 percent (Sax, 2007). Due to this increase, it is of great significance to understand the impact that gender has on the transition into college.¹ The transition into college is often a gendered experience, with men and women facing different obstacles to inclusion. Gender is a core axis around which social life revolves. Since we live within a patriarchal culture that is male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered (Johnson, 2005), gender is not merely a category of difference; it is a category of inequality. A key part of a patriarchal society is the oppression of women. America is also understood to be a masculine culture. Hofstede (2005) defines a masculine culture as one in which gender roles are clearly defined, where men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, while women are expected to be modest, tender, and concerned with

¹ In order to understand how gender is influential in students' transitions into college, the concept of gender must be clearly defined. The terms biological sex and gender are commonly intermixed in language today, and are assumed to have the same meaning. However, these two terms do, in fact, have different meanings. Biological sex is physiological. This includes one's chromosomal makeup, hormones, or genitalia (Lorber, 1994). Gender, on the other hand, is a social construction and institution (Lorber, 1994). Gender refers to the cultural expectations laid out based upon biological sex (Lorber, 1994). Gender is a label used to distinguish two groups of people (Unger, 1979). Gender is, "constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life" (Lorber, 1994, pg. 13).

the quality of life. Women in our culture are often hindered by the pervasiveness of these ideologies.

Some students may be unaware of the strong implications that gender has on their everyday life. In college, gender influences large decisions such as students' major and career choices (occupational segregation), living situations, and friend groups. Gender also influences small decisions such as what to eat at the dining hall and how to present oneself. Previous research uncovers that first year females are more likely to face body image issues (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2006) and are more likely to experience sexual harassment/assault (Sweeney, 2011). First year males are more likely to be confronted with pressures to uphold masculine standards (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2006), to feel forced to conceal vulnerability, and to suffer from alcohol and substance abuse (Davies et. al., 2000).

A large issue that college students face regarding gender is dissatisfaction with body image (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2006). Many sociocultural factors in America cause individuals to be overly concerned with their weight, shape, and appearance (Thompson et. al., 1999). When studying college students' perceptions of body image, Gillen & Lefkowitz (2006) uncovered that college females tend to have poor weight management practices and they assess their appearance more negatively than males. While it is more commonly known that women struggle to uphold traditional American beauty standards, males in our culture also face pressures to conform to masculine ideals such as being strong and suppressing emotions (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2006). Additional research uncovers that taking part in campus organizations that emphasize the significance of attractiveness, such as sororities and fraternities, can attribute to

individuals' preoccupation and dissatisfaction with their weight and body image (Schulken et. al., 1997).

II. Race/Ethnicity and First Year College Students

The enrollment of American racial minority students in colleges and universities has been steadily increasing over the last 30 years (Fischer, 2007). From 1976 to 2011, the percentage of Hispanic students in higher education rose from 4% to 14%, the percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander students rose from 2% to 6%, the percentage of Black students rose from 10% to 15%, and the percentage of American Indian/Alaska Native students rose from 0.7% to 0.9% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013). The majority of these students attend predominately white institutions (Fischer, 2007). As the number of minority students rises, it is increasingly necessary to understand how to address the needs of these students.

There are numerous reasons to suspect that adjusting to a new college atmosphere may be more difficult for racial minority students than it is for their white counterparts (Fischer, 2007). Racial minority students frequently face challenges for the sole reason of being a marginal population on a predominantly white campus (Fischer, 2007). African American students at predominately white institutions tend to face a wide range of race-related challenges compared to African American students at historically black colleges and universities (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). Thus, African American students at predominately white colleges and universities often have lower academic outcomes than students at historically black institutions (Fleming, 1981). Astin (1993) explains that racial conflict is very prevalent on college campuses. It is very common for African American students to have high stress levels and race consciousness (Fleming,

1981). Racial minority status is a unique source of stress for students, and it is vital that higher education professionals provide services for students to overcome these challenges (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007).

Moreover, racial minority students are more likely to be first generation college students and to be from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, which can lead to even more difficulties adjusting (Fischer, 2007). While adapting to college is challenging for all students, first generation students face more complex issues than students whose parents have attended college (Fischer, 2007). For first generation students, attending college is a huge alteration in their life course, as going to college was not in their family's traditional expectations (Terenzini et. al., 1993). The college adjustment occurs in three realms for first generation students: academic, social, and cultural (Terenzini et. al., 1993). Many non-traditional students (first generation college students and low SES students) had negative high school experiences, which indicated that they were incompetent and therefore expected to fail in college (Terenzini et. al., 1993).

It is widely understood that academic preparation in high school can assist in a successful transition into college. Interestingly, academic preparation varies greatly by race/ethnicity (Fischer, 2007). In a measure of Asian, white, Hispanic and Black high school students, Asian students took the most AP courses while in high school, averaging about four courses per student (Fischer, 2007). Asian students were followed by white students, who averaged 3.25 AP courses each (Fischer, 2007). Next were Hispanic students, who took 2.91 AP courses each (Fischer, 2007). Black students took the fewest number of AP courses, averaging 2.42 courses each (Fischer, 2007). These

figures illustrate differences in the academic preparation that Asian, white, Hispanic, and Black students received before attending college, which can have serious implications on students' transitions into college.

III. Social Class and First Year College Students

Perceived social class (PSC) refers to one's attitudes about their class standing in society. PSC is comprised of ideas regarding an individual's social capital, abilities, goals, values and perceived socioeconomic status (SES) (Padgett et. al., 2010). PSC includes tangible concepts such as parents' income, parents' education (Padgett et. al., 2010), access to health care, and ownership of material goods. Individuals' perceptions of their social class can impact many life experiences, including but not limited to: with whom individuals interact, with whom they form friendships, what social groups they join, how they are treated by others, how they present themselves, how much access they have to education, and others' expectations of their abilities.

Many individuals experience classism as a result of their social class status. Classism refers to discrimination based on social class, where individuals in lower class statuses, such as members of the working class or lower middle class, are treated in a manner that excludes, devalues, discounts, and separates them from those of a higher social status (Lott, 2002). PSC plays a large role in first year students' experiences while transitioning into college (Weidman, 1989; Padgett et. al., 2010), as classism is correlated with low levels of belonging, negative psychological outcomes, and a greater interest in leaving school (Longhout et. al., 2009).

Socioeconomic status has a consistent impact on retention, as students in higher SES quartiles are 15 to 20% more likely to persist than those in the lowest quartile

(Paulsen & Smart, 2013). Five years after enrolling in college, more than 40% of students from the top income quartile graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree, while only 6% from the lowest income quartile graduated (Fitzgerald & Delany, 2002). Moreover, studies have found that the interaction between race, gender, age and/or socioeconomic status can overwhelmingly influence the social experiences of new students, specifically in majors or programs that are overly populated by white, male, and middle- or upper- class students (Reyes, 2011).

Research proposes that low social class and low socioeconomic status students often have a difficult time adjusting to college life (Reyes, 2011). First year students from lower social class backgrounds report high stress levels due to their social class status (Saladña, 1994). Students in lower social classes often face the burden of balancing a job on top of academic and social adjustment. This added responsibility may affect their ability to participate in college life (Fischer, 2007). As noted in Astin's (1984) Student Involvement-Theory, students who are more involved in college life tend to be more successful. Students from low SES backgrounds are less involved in extracurricular activities, study less, work more, and have lower grades than their high SES counterparts (Walpole, 2003). The necessity for low SES first year students to hold a job during the school year may hinder students from reaching their full potential at their institution.

IV. Sexual Orientation and First Year College Students

A significant amount of research indicates that students who identify as a sexual minority face challenges on college campuses (Rankin, 2005). Over the past two decades, studies have shown that college campuses have been inhospitable, even

hostile, towards lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) students (Rankin, 2005). These patterns may occur due to the presence of heterosexism and homophobia on college campuses in America. Lorde (1985) defines heterosexism as, “a belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving over all others and thereby the right to dominate” (pg. 3). Heterosexism goes hand in hand with homophobia, which is the fear and hatred of homosexuality in oneself and others (Friend, 1992). The manifestation of these ideologies on college campuses may exist, in part, due to the presence of heterosexism and homophobia in American culture at large. The culture on college and university campuses is, perhaps, a reflection of society at large. Thus, just as many sexual minorities face struggles in society in general, college students who identify as sexual minorities face similar, if not worse, challenges on college campuses.

In empirical studies, more than 36% of LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) students reported experiencing harassment within the previous year – including derogatory comments, threats, homophobic graffiti, pressure to conceal one’s sexual orientation or gender identity, written comments, and physical assaults (Rankin, 2005). In a study of Yale University students, Herek (1993) found that many LGB students live in fear of anti-gay violence and harassment, which is so strong that it affects their day-to-day behaviors. In a quest to verify this information, replications of the survey were administered on a number of other campuses, which yielded similar results (Herek, 1993). D’Augelli (1989) uncovered that 50% of LGB students had been verbally insulted more than once, and that many students changed their daily routines to avoid harm.

Due to these factors, it is not surprising that LGB students consistently experience higher levels of mental health issues than heterosexual students (Oswalt &

Wyatt, 2011). Interestingly, bisexual students, on average, face higher levels of mental health issues than lesbian and gay students, consisting of anxiety, depression and panic attacks (Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011). Additionally, students who are sexual minorities are more likely to engage in negative risk taking behavior such as substance use and abuse, self-injurious behaviors, and suicidal behaviors, than heterosexual students (Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011). Loneliness is a very prevalent challenge for lesbian and gay youth (Longeream et. al., 2007). As a result of these elements, the rate of suicide for LGB individuals is much higher than that of heterosexual individuals (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007). Moreover, most suicide attempts among gay and lesbian individuals occur at age 20, which constitutes prime college years (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007).

As a result of negative attitudes towards individuals who identify as sexual minorities, many minority students have problems adjusting to the college atmosphere (Lance, 2008). Rankin (2005) explains that challenges faced by LGB students can, “prevent them from achieving their full academic potential or participating fully in campus communities” (pg. 17). In surveys on perceptions of campus climate, LGB students tend to rate campus climate lower than their non-LGB counterparts (Rankin, 2005). As a result, LGB students tend to consider leaving their institution and fear for their safety more often than heterosexual students (Rankin et. al., 2010).

Despite the negative experiences that LGB college students tend to have, there are positive findings on this topic, such as the discovery that students tend to become more accepting of sexual minorities as they get further along in their college education (Rothman et. al., 2011). Rothman et. al. (2011) uncovered that students in their senior year accept the LGB population more than those in their first year. During students'

college experiences, they may experience higher levels of interpersonal contact with LGB individuals, and thus become more accepting. Multiple findings demonstrate that heterosexual women, the nonreligious, those who self-identity as LGB, and student affairs staff members tend to be the most supportive of a range of sexual identities, and sensitive to the needs of the LGB population on campus (Holland et. al., 2013; Rothman et. al., 2011; Brown et. al., 2004).

There are many efforts being taken on college campuses throughout the United States to promote the acceptance of LGB individuals. However, despite these programs and the growing support for sexual minorities, this population still fears for their safety, which can lead to disengagement of sexual minority students – academically and socially (Rankin, 2005). Significantly, this study investigates the challenges faced by LBG and other sexual minority students at Happy Mood University (HMU) and determines their level of engagement in on-campus organizations. Moreover, the legalization of gay marriage across many US states may demonstrate that American ideals are shifting on this topic. Many studies on sexual minority college students' experiences have yet to catch up with the rapidly changing ideologies about heterosexuality. Thus, this study provides a more recent look into the contemporary sexual minority college students' transitions into college.

V. Religious Affiliation and First Year College Students

While recent attention has been given to correlations between college student demographics (specifically gender, race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status) and student outcomes, less attention has been given to college students' religious affiliations (Bowman & Small, 2012). It is critical that college students' religious affiliations receive

scholarly study, as the number of students from formal religions other than Christianity, as well as those who identify as atheist or agnostic, is steadily increasing (Clark et. al., 2002). Nearly 20% of students in public higher education institutions identify as religious minorities; Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, or Jewish (Schlosser & Sedlacek, 2001). Although the number of religious minority and non-religiously affiliated students is on the rise, little is known about how religious affiliation is related to student development and growth (Bowman & Small, 2012).

Despite the development of religious diversity in the US, a Christian ethos continues to exist in many campus cultures (Siefert, 2007). There is an assumption that all students are Christian (Clark et. al., 2002), and therefore students within the spiritual norm gain privilege that is often unconscious (Siefert, 2007). This privilege is demonstrated within the academic calendar, as it is designed around Christian holidays (Schlosser & Sedlacek, 2001). Sundays off and breaks at Christmas are constant reminders that American higher education was founded by Christian individuals (Siefert, 2007). Non-Christian students often face marginalization in the institution's calendar, physical facilities, and on-campus dining halls (Siefert, 2007). Religious privilege and marginalization have large influences on how students convey their spiritual identities during their college years (Small & Bowman, 2012), which can in turn impact their college experience as a whole.

Bryant and Astin (2008) explain that, "being a member of a minority religious group may present challenges that those identifying with majority traditions do not typically face" (pg. 19). Students who identify with religious minorities may be highly conscious of their marginalized status on campus and in US society at large (Small,

2011) and therefore religious minority status may be negatively related to students' mental well-being (Bowman & Small, 2012). In Bryant and Astin's 2008 study, students in religious minority groups experienced greater spiritual struggle than mainstream Christian and unaffiliated students. Further, students who are not religiously affiliated exhibit lower levels of well-being than students of the Christian majority (Bowman & Small, 2012). While it is understood that religious affiliation plays a large role in college students' experiences, it is apparent that additional research is needed to further understand these correlations. Additionally, previous research on college students' religious affiliations fails to examine the impact of religious identity on the transition into college.

As existing literature suggests, gender, race/ethnicity, perceived social class, sexual orientation, and religious identity have strong implications for first year students' transitions into college. This study will investigate the relationships between these identities and challenges that first year students face, as well as the role that involvement in on-campus groups and organizations plays throughout students' transitions. Due to the increasingly diverse college population and the importance of a successful transition, this research helps higher education professionals determine the best ways to cater to first year students' needs throughout the transition into college.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: In what ways does gender identity influence challenges faced by first year students throughout the transition into college?

RQ2: In what ways does racial/ethnic identity influence challenges faced by first year students throughout the transition into college?

RQ3: In what ways does perceived social class status influence challenges faced by first year students throughout the transition into college?

RQ4: In what ways does sexual orientation influence challenges faced by first year students throughout the transition into college?

RQ5: In what ways does religious affiliation influence challenges faced by first year students throughout the transition into college?

METHODS

I. Participants

Participants consisted of 774 undergraduate students (ages 18-22) at large, state school in the southeastern United States, which I call Happy Mood University, who completed a survey, and eleven first year honors students who participated in a focus group session. Of the survey respondents, 35% were first year students, 20% were sophomores, 23% were juniors, 20% were seniors, and 2% identified as “other,” meaning fifth year or transfer students. Since undergraduate students who were not in their first semester were eligible to participate in the survey, they were encouraged to recall their transition into college and their experiences prior to participating. Regarding gender, 79.5% participants identified as female, 20% as male, and .5% as transgender/other. Concerning race/ethnicity, students checked off any identifications that applied from the following; American Indian/Alaskan, Asian, Black or African American, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Multiracial, Non-resident Alien, and white. Eight percent of students checked off more than one racial/ethnic category and/or multiracial. The racial/ethnic breakdown percentages were as follows, .8% of students identified as American Indian/Alaskan, 5.7% Asian, 4% Black or African American, .4% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 4.1% Hispanic, .1% Non-Resident Alien, and 89% white.² In regards to perceived social class, 2.3% of students stated upper class, 39.4% upper middle class, 45.1% middle class, and 13.2% lower middle class/lower class. Concerning sexual orientation, 3.4% of students identified as bisexual, 2.6% as gay/lesbian, 90% as heterosexual, 1.4% as pansexual and 2.6% as queer/questioning.

² These percentages do not add up to 100%, as some students checked off more than one selection.

Lastly, regarding religion, 14.3% of students identified as Atheist/Agnostic, .8% as Buddhist, 60.6% as Christian, .3% as Hindu, 1.9% as Jewish, .5% as Muslim, 16.3% as “nothing in particular,” and 5.3% stated other, with 50% of the “other” responses consisting of Catholicism. The demographic breakdown of survey participants broadly reflects the breakdown of the university.

The eleven focus group participants were all first year students at Happy Mood University. Of the participants, eight were female and three were male. Regarding race, ten identified as white and one identified as Asian/Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. All of the participants were heterosexual. Concerning religion, nine of the focus group participants identified as Christian and two as Atheist/Agnostic. The demographics of the focus group participants also largely reflect the demographic breakdown of the university.

II. Procedures

In order to understand correlations between gender, race/ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, religious affiliation and first year students’ transitions into college, a mixed methods approach was employed once IRB approval was granted. Quantitative data was collected from a Qualtrics survey that was sent out to all undergraduate students at Happy Mood University through a bulk email. The email included information about the study and invited students to participate. Other information included the names and contact information of the researcher and research advisor, as well as an explanation that the survey is anonymous and confidential. Qualitative data was received from a focus group session with first semester honors students at Happy Mood University. Incentives for participation consisted of four \$10 gift cards to a popular local

restaurant that were auctioned off to four randomly selected survey participants and one \$10 gift card that was auctioned off to one randomly selected focus group participant.³

Participation in the survey and focus group were completely voluntary, confidential and anonymous, and individuals could cease participation at any time if they felt uncomfortable. The survey took about five to ten minutes to complete. The focus group was semi-structured and lasted about thirty minutes. Prior to the focus group discussion all participants read and signed consent forms.

III. Measures

Survey (Appendix A):

The goal of the survey was to gain quantitative data about students' demographics in relation to challenges faced throughout the transition into college. First, participants were asked their year in school. Next, participants were asked to identify their gender and if they are/were in any organizations relating to their gender identity during their first year at HMU. Then, students checked off any challenges they faced regarding their gender identity throughout their transition into college from an alphabetical list of 25 common challenges for first year students. Respondents repeated this process regarding race/ethnicity, perceived social class, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation. The challenges were listed in alphabetical order and the list was identical for each identity in order to remain as objective as possible. The list of 25 challenges has been categorized into six sections:

1. *Physical Challenges:* General body image issues, weight gain, weight loss, sexual harassment/assault

³ These incentives were funded by the Foundation Award for undergraduate research in the Sociology/Anthropology Department at James Madison University

2. *Psychological Challenges*: Depression, feeling overwhelmed, feeling stressed out, general anxiety, homesickness, inability to “fit in,” loneliness
3. *Academic Challenges*: Difficulty balancing social and academic life, difficulty keeping up with classwork, fear of meeting with professors outside of class, feel pressure to choose a certain major, poor grades, questioning choice of major
4. *Social Challenges*: Discrimination, inability to adjust to the college lifestyle, inability to participate in certain organizations, pressure to use alcohol/drugs, relationship difficulties, religious conflict, roommate conflict
5. *Financial Challenges*: Financial challenges
6. *None*

Two weeks after the survey was administered, the response window closed and surveys were no longer accepted. Data was transported from Qualtrics and analyzed through SPSS Statistics. Cross tabulation charts were made to determine the percentages of students who faced two or more challenges in each category. Chi-square and independent t-tests were run to test the significance between:

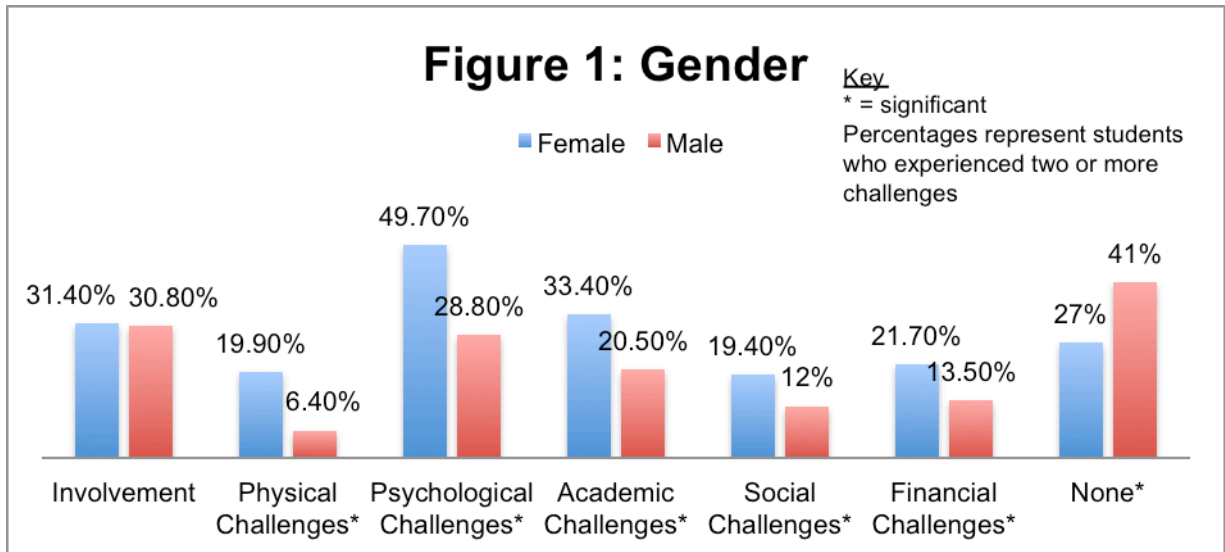
1. Gender, campus involvement, and challenges faced
2. Race/ethnicity, campus involvement, and challenges faced
3. Social class, campus involvement, and challenges faced
4. Sexual orientation, campus involvement, and challenges faced
5. Religious affiliation, campus involvement, and challenges faced

Focus Group (Appendix B):

One month after the survey was administered, a semi-structured focus group was conducted. Participants of the focus group were first year honors students with whom I have previously worked. The goal of the focus group was to further explore findings uncovered through survey data. The fact that the participants already knew each other and knew me was beneficial, as they felt very comfortable discussing personal issues. The focus group was discussion-based and consisted of five questions regarding challenges faced thus far in their college experiences. The questions focused on experiences in relation to participants' gender, race/ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and religion.

RESULTS

I. Gender⁴



Results show that 31.4% of females and 30.8% of males were involved in on-campus organizations in relation to their gender during their first year at HMU. A chi-square test shows that a significant relationship does not exist ($\chi^2(1)=.026$, $p=.873$), implying that gender is not correlated with involvement in on-campus organizations.

Regarding physical challenges, 19.9% of female participants and 6.4% of male participants experienced two or more physical challenges due to their gender while transitioning into college. An independent t-test demonstrates a significant difference in the scores for females ($M=.712$, $SD=.847$) and males ($M=.327$, $SD=.654$) conditions; $t(301.42)=6.152$, $p=.000$. In relation to psychological challenges, 49.7% of female participants and 28.8% of male participants faced two or more psychological challenges due to their gender throughout their transition into college. Results of an independent t-test show a significant difference in the scores for females ($M=1.995$, $SD=2.11$) and

⁴ Since transgender/other students only made up .5% of the population, only the experiences of students who identified as male or female were analyzed. The population of transgender/other was too small to make appropriate generalizations.

males ($M=1.128$, $SD=1.668$) conditions; $t(294.28)=5.473$, $p=.000$. Regarding academic challenges, 33.4% of female participants and 20.5% of male participants experienced two or more academic challenges due to their gender while transitioning into HMU. According to results from an independent t-test, a significant difference exists between females ($M=1.212$, $SD=1.538$) and males ($M=.795$, $SD=1.328$) conditions; $t(270.7)=3.385$, $p=.001$. In relation to social challenges, 19.4% of female participants and 12% of male participants faced two or more social challenges due to their gender while transitioning into college. An independent t-test demonstrates a significant difference in the scores for females ($M=.728$, $SD=1.089$) and males ($M=.43$, $SD=.873$) conditions; $t(290.32)=3.614$, $p=.000$. It appears that 21.7% of female participants and 13.5% of male participants faced financial challenges throughout the transition into college. A chi-squared test shows the results are significant ($\chi^2(1)=5.227$, $p=.022$).

Figure 1 demonstrates that 27% of females did not experience any challenges throughout their transition into college due to their gender, whereas 41% of males did not face any challenges. A chi-square test displays that the results are significant ($\chi^2(1) = 11.622$, $p=.001$). These results suggest that a significant difference between gender and challenges throughout the transition to college exists, as men faced fewer challenges than women.

II. Race/Ethnicity

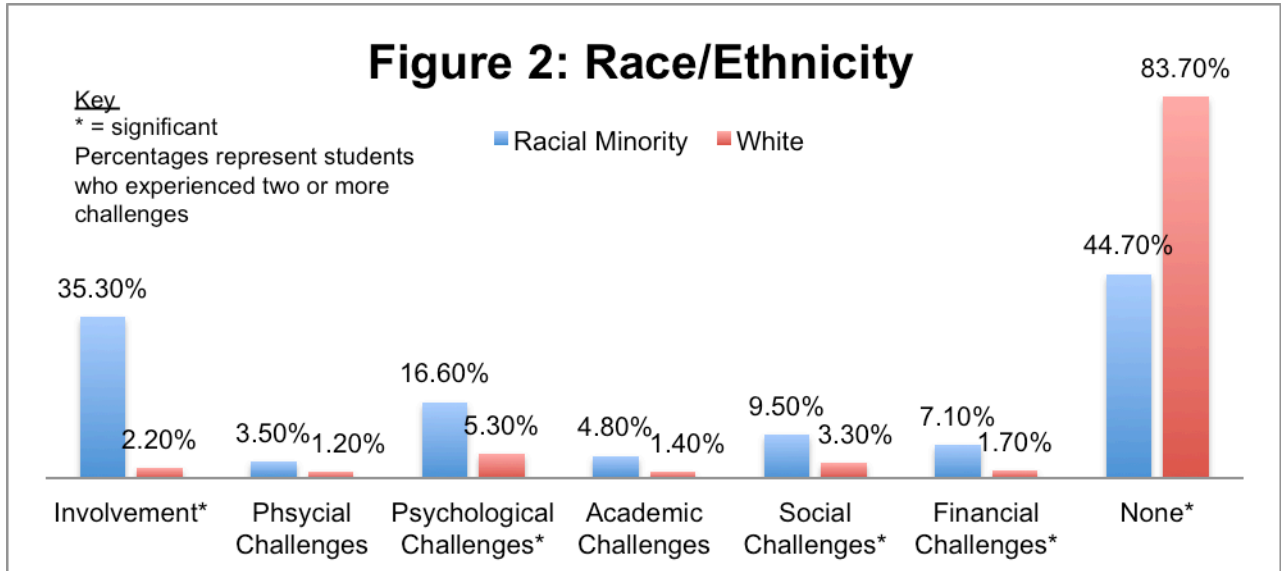


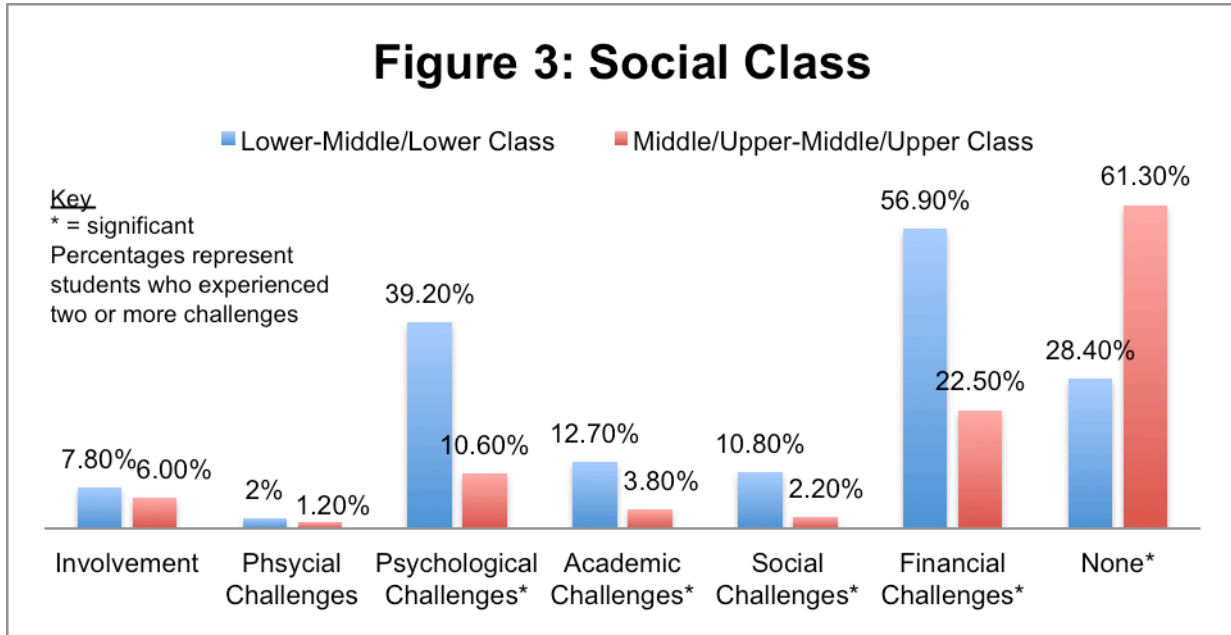
Figure 2 demonstrates that 35.3% of racial/ethnic minority participants were involved in an on-campus organization in relation to their race/ethnicity during their first year at HMU, while 2.2% of white participants were involved in an on-campus organization. Results of a chi-square test demonstrate a significant difference regarding on-campus involvement among racial/ethnic minority students and white students, ($\chi^2(1)=151.55, p=.000$).

Regarding physical challenges, 3.5% of racial/ethnic minority participants and 1.2% of white participants faced two or more physical challenges due to their race/ethnicity throughout their transition into HMU. An independent t-test uncovers that a significant difference does not exist between the scores for racial/ethnic minority students ($M=.165, SD=.459$) and white students ($M=.087, SD=.334$) conditions; $t(95.289)=1.511, p=.134$. In relation to psychological challenges, 16.6% of racial/ethnic minority students and 5.3% of white students faced two or more psychological challenges due to their race/ethnicity throughout their transition into college. An

independent t-test shows a significant difference in the scores for racial/ethnic minority students ($M=.777$, $SD=1.313$) and white students ($M=.235$, $SD=.896$) conditions; $t(93.887)=3.697$, $p=.000$. It appears that 4.8% of racial/ethnic minority students and 1.4% of white students faced two or more academic challenges due to their race/ethnicity throughout their transition into HMU. Results of an independent t-test demonstrate that there is not a significant difference in the scores for racial/ethnic minority students ($M=.2$, $SD=.799$) and white students ($M=.07$, $SD=.351$) conditions; $t(88.038)=1.487$, $p=.141$. Figure 2 demonstrates that 9.5% of racial/ethnic minority students and 3.3% of white students faced two or more social challenges due to their race/ethnicity while transitioning into HMU. According to results of an independent t-test, a significant difference exists among the scores for racial/ethnic minority students ($M=.506$, $SD=.854$) and white students ($M=.126$, $SD=.5$) conditions; $t(91.237)=4.015$, $p=.000$. Of all survey participants, 7.1% of racial/ethnic minority students and 1.7% of white students faced financial challenges throughout their transition into college. A chi-square test demonstrates that the relationship is significant ($\chi^2(1)=9.418$, $p=.002$).

It appears that 44.7% of racial/ethnic minority students and 83.7% of white students did not face any challenges due to their race/ethnicity throughout the transition into college. A chi-square test demonstrates that there is a significant difference in the absence of challenges among racial/ethnic minority students and white students. ($\chi^2(1)=70.648$, $p=.000$).

III. Social Class



It appears that 7.8% of lower/lower-middle class students and 6% of middle/upper-middle/upper class students were involved in an on-campus organization related to their social class status during their first year at HMU. A chi-square test demonstrates that the relationship between social class and on-campus involvement is not significant, ($\chi^2(1)=.544$, $p=.461$).

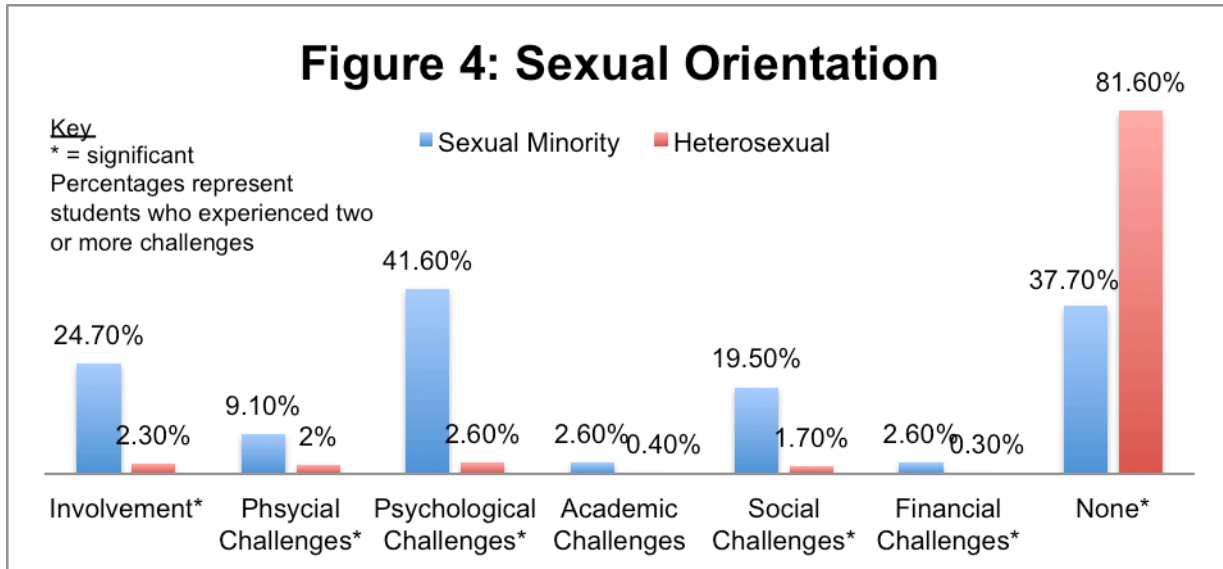
Regarding physical challenges, 2% of lower/lower-middle class students and 1.2% of middle/upper-middle/upper class students faced two or more physical challenges throughout their transition into college due to their social class status. An independent t-test shows that the relationship is not significant between lower/lower-middle class students ($M=.147$, $SD=.454$) and middle/upper-middle/upper class students ($M=.048$, $SD=.263$) conditions; $t(111.53)=2.159$, $p=.033$. In relation to psychological challenges, 39.2% of lower/lower-middle class students and 10.6% of middle/upper-middle/upper class students faced two or more psychological challenges

due to their social class status throughout their transition into college. Results of an independent t-test demonstrate a significant difference in the scores for lower/lower-middle class students ($M=1.451$, $SD=1.733$) and middle/upper-middle/upper class students ($M=.435$, $SD=1.041$) conditions; $t(112.32)=5.769$, $p=.000$. Figure 3 demonstrates that 12.7% of lower/lower-middle class students and 3.8% of middle/upper-middle/upper class students faced two or more academic challenges throughout their transition into college due to their social class status. According to results of an independent t-test, a significant difference exists in the scores for lower/lower-middle class students ($M=.5$, $SD=.952$) and middle/upper-middle/upper class students ($M=.167$, $SD=.537$) conditions; $t(110.95)=3.455$, $p=.001$. Regarding social challenges, 10.8% of lower/lower-middle class students and 2.2% of middle/upper-middle/upper class students faced two or more social challenges throughout their transition into college due to their social class status. An Independent t-test demonstrates a significant difference in the scores for lower/lower-middle class students ($M=.52$, $SD=.952$) and middle/upper-middle/upper class students ($M=.137$, $SD=.481$) conditions; $t(108.97)=3.985$, $p=.000$. Data shows that 56.9% of lower/lower-middle class students and 22.5% of middle/upper-middle/upper class students faced financial challenges throughout their transition into college due to their social class status. A chi-square test shows significant results ($\chi^2(1)=53.143$, $p=.000$).

Of all survey participants, 28.4% of lower/lower-middle class students and 61.3% of middle/upper-middle/upper class students did not face any challenges throughout their transition into college due to their social class status. Results of a chi-squared show a significant difference among lower/lower-middle class students and

middle/upper-middle/upper class students regarding the absence of challenges, ($\chi^2(1)=39.052, p=.000$).

IV. Sexual Orientation



Survey data shows that 24.7% of sexual minority students and 2.3% of heterosexual students were involved in on-campus organizations relating to their sexual orientation during their first year at HMU. A chi-square test demonstrates significance ($\chi^2(1)=80.438, p=.000$), suggesting that sexual orientation plays a role in on-campus involvement during the transition into college.

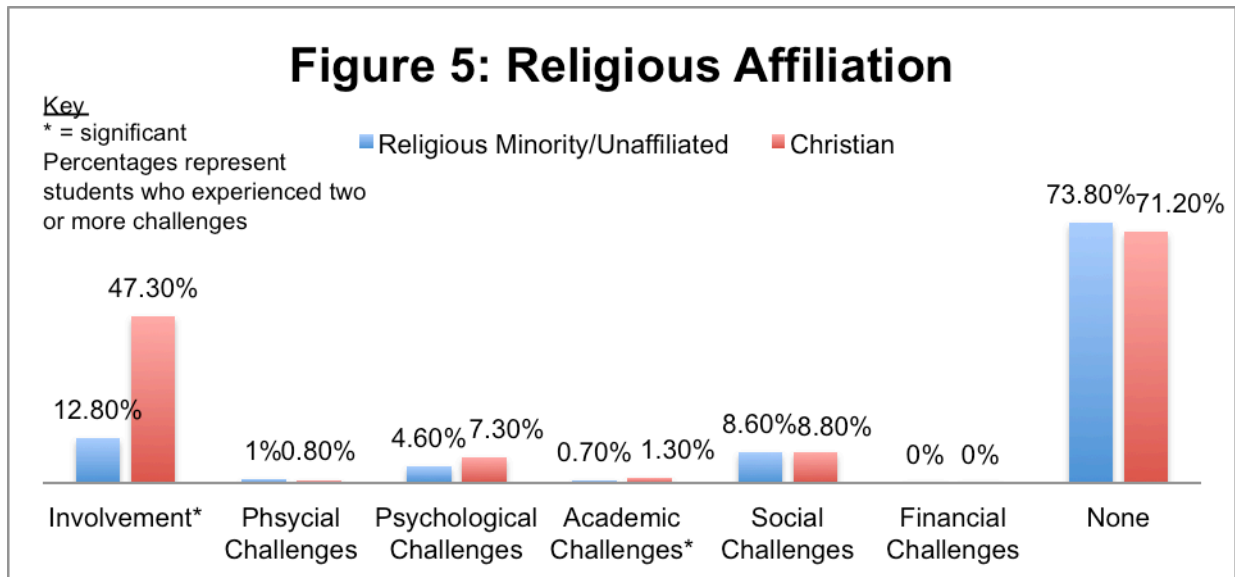
Regarding social challenges, 9.1% of sexual minority students and 2% of heterosexual students faced two or more physical challenges due to their sexual orientation throughout the transition into college. An independent t-test shows a significant difference in the scores for sexual minority students ($M=.351, SD=.807$) and heterosexual students ($M=.105, SD=.366$) conditions; $t(79.491)=2.643, p=.01$. It appears that 41.6% of sexual minority students 2.6% of heterosexual students faced two or more psychological challenges due to their sexual orientation throughout their

transition into HMU. According to results of an independent t-test, a significant difference exists among the scores for sexual minority students ($M=1.636$, $SD=1.806$) and heterosexual students ($M=.135$, $SD=.561$) conditions; $t(77.63)=7.258$, $p=.000$. Of all survey participants, 2.6% of sexual minority participants and .4% of heterosexual participants experienced two or more academic challenges due to their sexual orientation throughout their transition into college. An independent t-test shows that a significant difference does not exist between the scores for sexual minority students ($M=.182$, $SD=.79$) and heterosexual students ($M=.0316$, $SD=.212$) conditions; $t(77.214)=1.662$, $p=.101$. In relation to social challenges, 19.5% of sexual minority students and 1.7% of heterosexual students faced two or more social challenges due to their sexual orientation throughout their transition into college. Results of an independent t-test demonstrate a significant difference in the results for sexual minority students ($M=.922$, $SD=1.537$) and heterosexual students ($M=.112$, $SD=.4$) conditions; $t(77.14)=4.608$, $p=.000$. Figure 4 depicts that 2.6% of sexual minority students and .3% of heterosexual students faced financial challenges due to their sexual orientation throughout their transition into college. A chi-square test shows significance ($\chi^2(1)=7.2$, $p=.007$), suggesting that sexual orientation is correlated with financial challenges.

Of all survey participants, 37.7% of sexual minority students and 81.6% of heterosexual students did not face any challenges due to their sexual orientation throughout their transition into college. A chi-squared test demonstrates that the relationship is significant ($\chi^2(1)=76.318$, $p=.000$), inferring that sexual minority status is positively correlated with experiencing challenges throughout the transition into college.

More than 80% of heterosexual students did not face any challenges due to their sexual identity during their first year at HMU.

V. Religious Affiliation



Survey data shows that 12.8% of religious minority/unaffiliated students and 47.3% of Christian students were involved in religious on-campus organizations during their first year at HMU. A chi-square test shows significance ($\chi^2(1)=98.696$, $p=.000$), suggesting that religious affiliation plays a role in religious involvement on campus. Christian students were more heavily involved in on-campus organizations than their religious minority/unaffiliated counterparts.

As depicted in Figure 5, 1% of religious minority/unaffiliated students and 0.8% of Christian students faced two or more physical challenges throughout their transition into college due to their religious affiliation. According to results of an independent t-test, a significant difference does not exist among the scores for religious minority/unaffiliated students ($M=.01$, $SD=.099$) and Christian students ($M=.011$, $SD=.122$) conditions; $t(772)=-.099$, $p=.921$. Regarding psychological challenges, 4.6% of religious

minority/unaffiliated students and 7.3% of Christian students faced two or more psychological challenges throughout their transition into college due to their religious affiliation. Results of an independent t-test demonstrate that a significant difference does not exist among the scores for religious minority/unaffiliated students ($M=.203$, $SD=.611$) and Christian students ($M=.292$, $SD=.841$) conditions; $t(762.67)=-1.7$, $p=.09$. It appears that .7% of religious minority/unaffiliated students and 1.3% of Christian students faced two or more academic challenges throughout their transition into HMU due to their religious affiliation. An independent t-test shows a significant difference in the scores for religious minority/unaffiliated students ($M=.02$, $SD=.18$) and Christian students ($M=.085$, $SD=.322$) conditions; $t(756.99)=-3.623$, $p=.000$. In relation to social challenges, 8.6% of religious minority/unaffiliated students and 8.8% of Christian students faced two or more social challenges throughout their transition into college due to their religious affiliation. Results of an independent t-test show that there is not a significant difference between the scores for religious minority students ($M=.328$, $SD=.789$) and Christian students ($M=.36$, $SD=.865$) conditions; $t(772)=-.528$, $p=.598$. As demonstrated by Figure 5, 0% of religious minority/unaffiliated students and 0% of Christian students faced financial challenges throughout their transition into college due to their religious affiliation. It is clear that religious affiliation does not play a role in financial challenges while transitioning into college.

Of all survey participants, 73.8% of religious minority/unaffiliated students and 71.2% of Christian students did not face any challenges due to their religious affiliation while transitioning into college. A chi-square test shows that results are not significant,

($\chi^2(1)=.601$, $p=.438$), suggesting that religious affiliation does not play a role in experiencing challenges while transitioning into college.

DISCUSSION

I. Gender

Significant	Not Significant
Physical Challenges Psychological Challenges Academic Challenges Social Challenges Financial Challenges None	None

In a male-dominated culture where women face countless instances of discrimination, it is of no surprise that the transition into college provokes more challenges for female students. All of the categories of challenges were significantly influenced by gender, with a larger percentage of females than males facing two or more challenges in each category. This data suggests that the transition into college is, indeed, a gendered experience. Since on-campus involvement was not significantly different among genders, it can be understood that involvement does not play a role in the causation or aid in challenges.

Regarding physical challenges, this data supports Gillen & Leftkowitz's (2006) finding that first year females are more likely than first year males to face body image issues, and Sweeney's (2011) verdict that first year females are more likely to experience sexual harassment/assault than first year males throughout their transition into college. These findings demonstrate that the pressure for first year women to uphold beauty standards may be influential to their transition into college, as nearly 20% of female participants faced two or more physical challenges throughout their transition into college, whereas a mere 6.4% men faced two or more challenges.

Data demonstrates that women are more likely than men to experience psychological challenges throughout their transition into college, which supports

Kawachi & Berkman's (2001) statement that in general, women tend to experience higher levels of psychological distress than men. This finding speaks to the pattern that women are more likely than men to have internalized disorders, such as anxiety and depression.

Gender also influences academic challenges, as significantly more females than males faced two or more challenges due to their gender. This finding seems to contradict Sax's (2009) findings that women have a well-known record of academic engagement, women see more value than men in attending classes and finding their passions, and that men are more likely to feel bored in class. Since college is relatively new for females, this finding may indicate that more work is needed to make the academic realm of college life more female-friendly. It is clear that additional research is needed to further understand the correlation between gender and academic challenges throughout the transition into college. Future research should also consider students' majors in relation to academic challenges, as female students in stereotypically masculine disciplines may face different types and intensities of challenges than female students in typically feminine majors.

Data demonstrates that gender is important in relation to social challenges, as a significantly higher percentage of females faced two or more social challenges due to their gender while transitioning into college. Steven*, a male focus group participant, spoke to this pattern.

I feel like girls are pressured to drink more [while out at parties]. People seem to want girls to drink a lot more than they would want a guy to drink.

Mimi,* a female, explained her personal struggles when going out.

I personally like going out with my guy friends because I feel much safer.

On the other hand, Bob,* a male, explained his lack of social problems associated with being male.

Well, speaking as a white male, there's nothing crminating against you.

Gender even influences financial challenges throughout the transition into college. This finding may be due to gender wage gap between men and women, however, future research is needed to uncover the reasoning for this correlation.

A significant difference is apparent regarding the absence of challenges among female and male students. On average, male students were less likely to face challenges throughout their transition into college than female students. This finding represents the extent to which gender inequality in the larger American culture pervades college campuses.

II. Race/Ethnicity

Significant	Not Significant
Involvement Psychological Challenges Social Challenges Financial Challenges None	Physical Challenges Academic Challenges

The survey results suggest that race/ethnicity has a substantial influence on the transition into college. A higher percentage of racial/ethnic minority students faced two or more challenges due to their racial/ethnic identity in all but two categories. While racial/ethnic minority students are significantly more involved in on-campus organizations than their white counterparts, there are still disparities among racial/ethnic identities when it comes to challenges.

The finding that more racial/ethnic minority students faced two or more psychological challenges throughout their transition into college than white students supports Greer & Chawlisz's (2007) statement that racial minority status is a unique source of stress for students. Since this survey was conducted on a predominately white campus (81.19% white), racial/ethnic minority students may feel greater psychological challenges merely due to being a minority amidst a sea of white students. In addition, it is not surprising that a greater proportion of racial/ethnic minority students faced two or more social challenges throughout their transition into college than white students. This finding demonstrates that race is largely influential to social life, especially for racial/ethnic minority students on a predominately white campus.

Data uncovers that higher percentages of racial/ethnic minority students reported experiencing financial challenges due to their racial/ethnic identity throughout their transition. Fisher (2007) explains that racial minority students are more likely to be from low SES backgrounds, which may explain this finding, however, future research is needed to further understand this correlation.

Physical challenges appear to be uninfluenced by racial/ethnic identity. Rubin et. al. (2003) explain that African American and Latina cultures provide women with positive ways of experiencing their bodies, which may explain this finding. Black and Latina women tend to show concern for body care and nurturance (Rubin et. al., 2003), which may account for the lack of physical challenges among some racial/ethnic minority female students. In respect to minority male students, future research is needed to examine racial/ethnic minority males' experiences with body image.

The survey results depict that academic challenges are not influenced by racial/ethnic identity. This data supports Fischer’s (2007) finding that Asian students took the most AP courses in high school, and therefore it can be argued that this group is the most prepared for college. However, this data contradicts the finding that African American students at predominately white institutions tend to attain lower academic outcomes than those at historically black colleges and universities (Fleming, 1981). The finding in the present study may reflect the relatively low numbers of African American respondents in the survey, as thus may provide support for Fischer’s finding. Further examination of academic challenges within each racial/ethnic identity is needed to better understand this correlation.

It is important to discuss the absence of challenges throughout the transition into college among racial/ethnic minority and white students. Over 80% of white students reported experiencing no challenges throughout their transition into college due to their racial identity, whereas just under 45% of racial/ethnic minority students reported no challenges. This substantial difference demonstrates the significance that race/ethnicity plays throughout the transition into college, which speaks to the broader context of racial/ethnic inequality in American culture.

III. Social Class

Significant	Not Significant
Psychological Challenges Academic Challenges Social Challenges Financial Challenges None	Involvement Physical Challenges

While college was once reserved for only the elite and economically well off, the institution is now open to any and all who are willing and able to attend. With the

availability of student loans, attending college has become increasingly likely for individuals who may not have been able to afford the opportunity in the past. However, individuals of lower social classes often experience challenges unique to their lower-class status. All but one category of challenges (physical challenges) was influenced by social class status, with higher percentages of lower/lower-middle class students facing two or more challenges in each category. On-campus involvement with organizations related to social class status does not differ significantly across social classes.

A large difference is apparent in the percentage of participants who reported two or more psychological challenges between lower/lower-middle class students and middle/upper-middle/upper class students. The finding that classism is related to negative psychological implications such as low sense of belonging (Longhout et. al., 2009), helps to explain this correlation. Additionally, Saladña (1994) found that first year students from low SES backgrounds experienced high stress levels and difficulty adjusting to college life due to their social class status. Steven*, a first year student at HMU, explained how he often felt left out due to his lower social class status.

Some people automatically expect me to be able to do something, and I just can't do those things that they can.

When discussing where to live next year,

People ask, 'Aren't your parents paying for you to live off campus?' And I'm like, 'No, they're not.'

Social life was also largely influenced by social class, with a higher percentage of lower/lower-middle class students facing two or more social challenges than middle/upper-middle/upper class students. Samantha* explained her inability to join certain social groups due to financial reasons.

Some social groups are way too expensive for me to justify spending so much money.

Jess* described the need to have a job while in college and how that has influenced her social life.

I know that I need to get one [a job]...it's not gonna be an option.

Jess explained that she is the only one in her friend group that will need to hold a job during college, which she believes will influence her social life by demanding her time that could be used to study, socialize, or could be devoted to extracurricular activities. Since low SES students are often forced to balance a job on top of adjusting to college life, students may struggle to adjust to college life (Fischer, 2007).

Financial challenges were one of the largest areas in which experiences between lower/lower-middle class students and middle/upper-middle/upper class students differed. Jess* explained her experience struggling financially.

Scholarships are going to be a big thing, which I am kind of at a disadvantage for because they are often dependent on what specific major you are.

Social class did not influence the experience of physical challenges throughout the transition into college. However, social class did impact the absence of challenges throughout the transition into college, as over 60% of middle/upper-middle/upper class students did not face any challenges due to their social class status. This data demonstrates the advantages and disadvantages that stem from social-class bias and classism in America.

IV. Sexual Orientation

Significant	Not Significant
Involvement Physical Challenges Psychological Challenges Social Challenges Financial Challenges None	Academic Challenges

The survey data demonstrates that college culture effectively reflects the larger patterns of heterosexism and homophobia that exist within American culture. In all categories except academic challenges, higher percentages of sexual minority students experienced two or more challenges. Just fewer than 25% of sexual minority students were involved in on-campus organizations pertaining to their sexual orientation, yet high percentages of sexual minority students experienced two or more challenges in many categories.

A higher percentage of sexual minority students faced two or more physical challenges due to their sexual identity. This finding may be related to the intense discrimination that sexual minority students often face on college campuses, which may cause self-doubt and body image issues. Future research is needed to determine this correlation.

It is not surprising that almost 50% of sexual minority students faced two or more psychological challenges throughout their transition into HMU. Many LGB students experience high levels of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, panic attacks, loneliness, suicidal thoughts and suicidal attempts (Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011; Longerream et. al., 2007; Grossman & D’Augelli, 2007). Future research is needed to examine the experiences of sexual minorities outside of the LGB population.

Higher levels of sexual minority students reported two or more social challenges throughout their transition into college. Many campuses are hostile towards LGB students, with multiple LGB students reporting derogatory comments, threats, anti-homosexual graffiti, and physical assaults within the previous year (Rankin, 2005). Again, further research is needed to address experiences of those outside of the LGB population.

It is interesting that financial challenges were significantly impacted by sexual orientation. This finding may represent the larger issue of inequality that exists in our culture, as sexual minorities are often discriminated against and may not be offered the same financial resources as sexual majority students. Future research is needed to further understand the correlation between sexual orientation and financial challenges throughout the transition into college.

The absence of challenges for heterosexual students was significant. Over 80% of heterosexual students reported experiencing no challenges due to their sexual identity throughout their transition into college. The majority of sexual minority students faced at least one challenge throughout their transition into college. This finding demonstrates the extent to which heterosexual individuals experience privilege and sexual minority students face disadvantages in American culture.

V. Religious Affiliation

Significant	Not Significant
Involvement Academic Challenges	Physical Challenges Psychological Challenges Social Challenges Financial Challenges None

Despite previous literature suggesting that religious affiliation plays a role in the college experience, these results demonstrate that religious affiliation does not influence the transition into college. On-campus involvement differs significantly among religious affiliations, as Christian students were more heavily involved in religious organizations throughout their transition into college.

The only category of challenges that appeared to be significant was academic challenges. 1.3% of Christian participants faced two or more academic challenges throughout their transition, whereas .7% of religious minority/unaffiliated students faced two or more challenges. This finding contradicts the idea that Christian students have Christian privilege, and should therefore outperform minority students. Future research is needed to further understand this correlation.

Religious affiliation did not have a significant influence on physical challenges, psychological challenges, social challenges, financial challenges, and the absence of challenges. These findings contrast with Bryant and Astin's (2008) statement that members of minority religious groups may face obstacles that those who identify with majority religious affiliations do not usually face. This study demonstrates that religious affiliation does not influence the presence or absence of challenges throughout the transition into college. Jess* explained how her peers are very open to diversity of religious beliefs, which may explain the low number of social challenges associated with religious affiliation.

On my floor, there are people that identify as atheists, and Jewish, and different denominations of Christianity, and I thought that that might be a point of contention. But, I found everyone to be very respectful of each other beliefs, and we've actually had a lot of conversations about it. We talk about the viewpoints and the family backgrounds that we come from that have led us to our decisions.

I think that what could have been something not so nice actually turned out to be pretty okay.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that students' personal identities are very influential in the transition into college. It is evident that inequalities that exist in the larger culture pertaining to gender, race/ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation pervade into college culture, and thus influence the transition into college for many students. While the transition into college can be difficult in and of itself, students' identities can either ease or amplify its complexity.

At the broadest level, the best way to ease the identity-based challenges faced by students is to confront and dismantle the systems of inequality that provide contour and context to the experience of higher education. Colleges and universities do not exist in a vacuum, of course, and the challenges students face are informed by and shaped within the crucible of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class inequality in the wider culture. Of course, dismantling structural inequality is a problem much broader than the scope of what is possible for any college or university, which speaks to the need for colleges and universities to continue to implement policies and initiatives aimed at providing support to students whose lives and biographies are constrained by the realities of social inequality.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Now that we are aware of the inequalities that exist within the college culture, what can we do next? Being educated about these inequalities is the first step. Once the existence of knowledge is solidified, actions towards improvement can be taken. Student affairs personnel are often the first individuals with whom first year students are in contact, and therefore it is vital that they receive training about the existence of these inequalities. Training of college student personnel can consist of workshops geared towards critical interrogations of the realities of social inequalities on campus and in the wider culture in addition to appreciation and acceptance of diversity and differences within student populations. This would include regular “climate surveys” of students to assess the challenges that students are facing. College student personnel must be understanding and sensitive to individual student needs that are framed by the structural realities of social inequality, and they must be able to assist and point students in the right direction if they face challenges throughout their transition.

In order to cultivate awareness amongst students, colleges and universities can implement a required diversity course for first year students. This course would cover topics pertaining to sexism, racism, heterosexism, homophobia, and class inequality. Within these courses, panels can be held where current students who face oppression and discrimination on a daily basis can share their experiences, and thus provide first year students with an eye-opening opportunity to step into the shoes of the panelists.

In current times, the first impression of a college or university often stems from media presence. Therefore, it is vital that higher education institutions present an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere online, as well as provide the public with relevant

and accurate information regarding institutional policies and programs for oppressed, marginalized, and disadvantaged students.

Next, on an institutional level, there are practices and policies that can be implemented on college campuses geared towards each significant marker of identity. Privilege and its antonym, disadvantage, within the college campus are often marked by the distribution of resources among groups and organizations on campus. At HMU specifically, organizations with missions geared towards sexual assault survivors, women's health, and sexual minority students are given limited funding. In turn, these groups are unable to function to the best of their ability. In contrast, organizations geared towards student entertainment and leisure, while also imperative to student success, are given disproportionately large amounts of funding. This funding, arguably, could be better used to aid students in dire situations. It is imperative to examine the allocation of resources colleges and universities in the US and to determine ways in which funds can best support students, including (and notably) students in need or at risk. Below are ways in which colleges and universities can reduce challenges faced by marginalized, disadvantaged, and oppressed groups, and ways colleges and universities can lessen the inequality that exists on campuses.

I. Gender

This study makes it clear that the transition into college is a gendered experience, with females facing more challenges than males throughout their transition. Thus, it is vital that college campuses contain support groups and women's centers as safe spaces for students to discuss personal issues and overcome challenges associated with their gender. Additionally, a required course on women's and gender

studies, and/or the inclusion of women's and gender studies courses within the general education curriculum, would be beneficial, as it would increase inclusion and understanding of gender and sexual inequality (Tierney, 1993; Astin, 1993). Student-lead organizations and/or workshops with focuses on how to navigate college life as a female, woman, or trans individual can also be helpful. Additionally, programs and peer-lead students groups with missions to limit and end campus sexual assault, as well as educate students about sexism, may positively influence campus culture.

II. Race/Ethnicity

Despite efforts by student services at HMU to improve the experience of minority students on campus, members of racial/ethnic minority groups in this study faced several challenges related to their racial/ethnic identity. Thus, it is apparent that change is necessary. While the ideal solution would be to erase racism and racial discrimination as a whole from our culture, change can be made at universities on an institutional level to improve the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students. For example, campus funding can be used to implement programs and training for all students to better understand the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students and to recognize the realities of racism in both interpersonal and institutional contexts.

Survey results show that less than half (35.3%) of minority students are involved in on-campus organizations related to their racial/ethnic identity. Perhaps extending efforts towards membership in these organizations may limit the obstacles faced by this population on campus. As mentioned previously, merely being a person of color on a predominately white campus can serve as a unique challenge for racial/ethnic minority students. Therefore, it is vital that services and peer groups exist on campus for

racial/ethnic minority students to accept and appreciate their identity, as well as converse with other students who may be facing similar experiences.

III. Social Class

It is clear that individuals of lower/lower-middle class status face struggles specific to their class status. Although HMU offers services such as financial aid and work-study, it is apparent that individuals are still facing challenges while adjusting to the college environment. Thus, colleges and universities must extend efforts to improve the experiences of these students. These efforts can consist of setting limits on the cost of membership in certain organizations, providing alternative housing options for low SES students (such as a certain allotment of rooms in each residence hall for students who reach a certain income level), and individual counseling for students with financial advisors to overcome financial challenges and strengthen the balance between school and work.

IV. Sexual Orientation

It is vital that colleges and universities extend efforts to improve the experiences of sexual minority students on campus. This can be done through implementing strongly funded organizations on campus that serve as safe spaces for sexual minorities and allies, as well as provide education for the campus community about the experiences of sexual minority students and the realities of heterosexism on campus and in the wider culture. Campus events such as performances and speakers can lead to a more accepting and open campus atmosphere. Courses about sexual diversity and inclusion of sexual minority experiences in sexual health classes can also have positive impacts.

Lastly, requirements for college staff and professors to be trained on sexual minority issues can create a more welcoming and inclusive atmosphere.

LIMITATIONS

A limitation of this research is the demographic makeup of the survey participants. Of the 774 survey participants the breakdown is as follows; 79.5% female, 20% male, 89% white, 90% heterosexual, and 60% Christian. Although this demographic makeup is roughly reflective of the larger HMU student population in many respects, it may have affected the results as the proportions of minority students in each identity were significantly less than the majority. For example, I was unable to include results in the gender section from transgender/other students as the population only made up .5% of survey participants. I recommend that future research on this topic use a random samples method and assure equal numbers of minority and majority students for each identity.

Additionally, analyses including an intersectional approach to markers of identity would add to and complicate our knowledge of the impact of identity and inequality on the transition into college. For example, women of color may face challenges that men of color or white women do not face. Or, lesbian women from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds may face challenges not encountered by lower socioeconomic status heterosexual women or by lesbian women who are economically well off. More research on intersecting identities is needed.

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