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Perceptions of Stress and Coping in Traditional Age First-year College Students

by

Bridgett Grant

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
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Perceptions of Stress and Coping in Traditional Age First-year College Students

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University of Nebraska, 2020

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This qualitative research study examined the perceptions of stress and coping in traditional-age, first-year college students. This study sought to form an understanding of the participants' lived experiences relating to stress and coping throughout their first semester of college. Five participants' were separately interviewed twice for the purposes of data collection. The findings from the data analysis process showed that these first-year college students experienced stress as a result of new and challenging academic expectations while also trying to navigate interpersonal relationships. Further, participants' in this study experienced stress as a result from interacting with social media. These traditional-age, first-year college students also utilized various coping strategies to deal with the stressors in their lives. These coping strategies included both effective and ineffective techniques. Recommendations are offered for student affairs professionals and areas for future research.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Dan and Sandra Grant. Without your continued support I would not have accomplished all that I have thus far. You raised me to always work towards my dreams, no matter how impossible they seemed at the start. Thank you for supporting me throughout my six years of higher education and always being my number one support. I love you both, forever and always.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Stress can have negative effects on an individual and their mental well-being—in fact, many college students have expressed that stress has attributed to a sharp decline in their mental health. This has in turn caused college students to experience feelings of depression and anxiety as well as led them to develop substance abuse issues (Coiro, Bettis, & Compas, 2016). Seeking help when an individual is experiencing these feelings is important: however, access to adequate mental health services can be challenging as a college student. Most college campuses provide some form of mental health services, but they are not always easily accessible for students because of concern regarding money, long wait periods to get an appointment, and the stigma surrounding mental health concerns (Coiro et. al., 2016). Mental health as a whole has become a significant issue for many college students and the discussion surrounding it is essential to helping to break down the stigma that encompasses mental health challenges and concerns. Mental health is defined as an individualized state of well-being where each person is able to realize their own potential, are able to cope with normal stresses of life, and are able to make a contribution to their community (“Mental health”, 2015).

Mental health challenges lead to a myriad of problems for college students, including unsatisfactory academic performance and in some cases, fully withdrawing from an institution (Coiro et. al., 2016). Past research has pointed to how first-year college students experience high levels of stress due to the adjustment they undergo while transitioning to college. These stressors often include leaving behind the support network of their friends and family and moving into a residence hall with new people (Bland, Melton, Welle, & Bigham, 2012) and having a substantial amount of pressure placed on

their shoulders telling them how academically successful they need to be. This pressure can stem from their own internal thoughts or from their family or other adults in their lives (Garett, Liu, & Young, 2017).

Importance of Mental Health

While going to college can be a positive experience, dealing with mental health problems is an undesired part of the college experience—and has become much more present in the last 10 to 15 years (Coiro et. al., 2016). According to Hales (2009), college is considered one of the most stressful times, and experiences, in an individual's life. A study by Dyson and Renk (2006) showed that many college students experience a notable rise in their psychological disturbance as a result of the transition into college. Other findings from research suggests that there are particular aspects of transitioning into college that may be the cause of the symptoms of psychological disturbances, and these aspects include moving away from their support system, increased academic responsibility, as well as homesickness (Dyson & Renk, 2006).

Mental health is an important subject area to focus on, however; it is also essential to focus on one of the root causes of poor mental health: stress. As stated by Bland and colleagues (2012) “Several studies have also shown a decrease in the mental health status of college students due to stress” (p. 363). Further, stress has been shown to not only have a negative effect on an individual's mental health, but it also has the capacity to affect someone's physical health. The American Psychological Association (2013) reported that if someone suffers from short-term stress, they are subject to issues with gastrointestinal problems, heart attacks, or arrhythmias. If an individual suffers from chronic stress, studies have shown that chronic fatigue, problems with irritability,

difficulty with concentration, eating disorders, and depression are all possible results (American Psychological Association, 2013). It has been mentioned multiple times that college students experience stress—in fact, Pierceall and Keim (2007) found that 75% of undergraduate students suffer from at least moderate levels of stress.

Stress

The impact that stress has on incoming first-year college students is a significant concern within the system of higher education because research has found first-year college students have higher levels of stress, as well as decreased emotional well-being than their upperclassmen peers (Dyson, & Renk, 2006). Research revealed the transition to college could cause first-year college students to experience stress because of the lack of familiarity they have with this new phase of life. Students move away from their hometowns, into a residence hall with new individuals, and have to work to build a new support network as they are away from their friends and family who once made up their network of support (Denovan & Macaskill, 2012). Changes in mood often follow this initial transition for college students as they begin to adjust to their new life. The initial experience of leaving home exacerbates the stress college students feel and as they work through the college transition, students often begin to lack proper amounts of sleep, proper nutrition, as well as possibly increasing the intake of substances (Dalton & Hammen, 2018). The lack of proper nutrition is often a result of a lack of financial means, which leaves students unable to buy nutritionally dense foods. Other factors such as a lack of a consistent routine and poor food choices in the dining halls can also contribute to this.

Coping

As defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping is constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person. Essentially, coping is the process in which an individual goes through to deal with any stress that is presented to them. One of the most important skills for an individual to have when attempting to cope with stress is their decision-making skills. The decision-making process for a young college student can be impaired because of their lack of brain development at 17-19 years of age (Dalton & Hammen, 2018). As a result of that, it is not uncommon for students to cope in unhealthy ways—often with the use of drugs and alcohol (Dalton & Hammen, 2018). Understanding what college students perceive as coping mechanisms can help professionals support these students and their ways of coping. Past research shows that this new generation of college students place higher value on social media than the previous generations have (Deatherage, Servaty-Seib, & Aksoz, 2013). It is important to understand what role social media plays in the stress that college students are experiencing so further research can be done to help relieve the present stress, and hopefully prevent further development of severe stress. Finally, there is hope that this research project will offer insight into how Generation Z college students interact with and experience social media.

High stress levels are often the result of a combination of the above-mentioned factors and first-year college students often lack the skills and tools to cope with their high stress levels in a productive manner. Dalton and Hammen (2018) found that traditional first-year college students are more likely to seek out negative coping

behaviors than their upperclassmen peers. And, a failure to cope with stress productively can have a negative impact on an individual and lead to unhealthy behaviors such as drinking, smoking, and drug use, as well as developing an eating disorder in order to cope with stress (Bland et. al., 2012).

Differences of Generation Z College Students

This research study focuses on current traditional age first-year college students. The current generation of students are a part of Generation Z and it is important to look at how they attempt to deal with stress. Past research and literature that addresses how college students experience and deal with stress. This literature often focuses on familial issues, monetary insecurity, sleep insecurity, and lack of proper nutrition (Chao, 2012). However, it fails to address the generational differences that may be causing higher stress levels. More recently, research has provided information showing that new generations of college students (i.e., Millennials and Generation Z) are experiencing more stress than generations in the past (Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, & Benton, 2003). Currently, there is not an abundance of research focused on this new generation of college students, Generation Z, but there is substantial research discussing the generation of Millennials and their experiences with stress and college. For Millennials, it was imposed very early in life that in order to be admitted to college they must be extremely successful in high school, and this level of pressure is often stacked on them by their parents and school system (Bland et al., 2012). As a result of this pressure to succeed, this new generation of students grew up with overly full schedules while they were monitored closely by parents and school personnel. Besides this, college students today often struggle with the search for their own identity and autonomy, as well as their life purpose (Bland et al., 2012). All

of these expectations combined creates an immense level of pressure that is placed upon these young minds.

Gaps in Current Literature

There are gaps in past research that fail to investigate what current first-year college students are experiencing as their primary sources of stress and how this stress may affect them during their first-year transition into life as a college student. Two areas that have potentially added to the levels of stress for college students are internet and social media use. In today's society, college students have integrated the internet, as well as social media use, into almost all aspects of their daily lives. They have also placed high value on both the internet and various social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and SnapChat (Deatherage et. al., 2013). Past research has connected high levels of internet use with increased symptoms of depression and social anxiety, as well as depleted levels of communication between families and college students (Kraut et al, 1998).

The following study aims to address the gaps in current literature by focusing on current first-year college students and their perceptions of and experiences with stress and coping. Current first-year college students have direct access to the internet and social media that is different than it has been for past generations—and these newer generations of college students tend to place a higher value on both internet and social media. Considering these generational differences, this study aspires to investigate what current, traditional, first-year college students perceive as stressors throughout their first semester of college. Along with this, healthy ways of coping with stress are often lacking for these

young adults, so this study also aims to gather information on what the students' perceptions of healthy coping mechanisms are.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to understand what current, traditional-age, first-year college students perceive and experience as stressors during their first semester in college. This research study defines or identifies traditional first-year college students to be between the ages of 17-19 who have not attended another college or university before participating in the study. Further, this study aims to investigate what the participants' perceive as coping mechanisms for stress. This research study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What do current traditional first-year college students perceive as stressors during their first year of college?
 - a. How do they experience stress?
2. What do traditional first-year college students identify as coping mechanisms?

This research study is focused on truly understanding the different experiences that traditional first-year college students go through regarding stress and coping. Further, as this study is focused on traditional first-year college students, the participants' in this study will be between the ages of 17-19 and be a part of Generation Z. There is a lack of current research focusing on this new generation of college students. This research study is also focused on understanding the generational differences in regard to stress and coping for traditional first-year college students.

Definition of Terms

In this section, I will discuss and define the common terms correlated to this research study. The terms related to this research study include the following: mental health, traditional first-year student, stress, and coping.

1. *Mental health*: According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is defined as an individualized state of well-being where each person is able to realize their own potential, are able to cope with normal stresses of life, and are able to make a contribution to their community (“Mental health”, 2015). As this research paper centers on the mental health of first-year college students, it is important to know what the definition of mental health is in order to understand what is considered normal, and not normal.
2. *Stress*: According to the American Institute of Stress, stress is an extremely difficult term to define as it is highly individual to each person and what they personally feel as stressful. The way that stress has been defined for decades is as follows: The non-specific response of an individual’s body to any kind of demand for change (“What is stress”, 2017). This definition has been used since 1936 and was coined by Hans Selye. While there are many definitions of stress currently in use, this research study will follow the definition set by the American Institute of Stress and Hans Selye.
3. *Coping*: The American Psychological Association (n.d.) describes coping as the actions or thought processes that an individual utilizes to combat a stressful situation, as well as the individual’s own personal reaction to said stress.
4. *Traditional first-year college student*: The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) (Cross, 2015) considers a traditional college

student to be between the ages of 18-22. On average, it takes an individual between 4-6 years to graduate with their bachelor's degree. While the AASCU's definition is not specific to first-year student age, one can infer that a traditional first-year student would be approximately 18 years old, varying by a few years depending on the birth year of the student, and so, the traditional age of a first-year college student would be between 17-19 years of age. Further, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia also states that a first-year college student is an individual that is attending a college institution for the first time since they graduated college—this can include students who took summer classes before the fall semester. Thus, this research project defines a traditional first-year student as an individual between the ages of 17-19 and have not attended another institution prior to the fall semester.

5. *Generation Z*: Generation Z individuals are defined as anyone who was born between the year 1997 and the present year (“Defining generations”, 2019).
6. *Millennial*: A Millennial is any individual who was born between the years 1981 and 1996 (“Defining generations”, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping will serve as the theoretical framework for this study. This theory states that stress is the result of a two-step process. The first step is when the environment surrounding an individual produces a stressor and the second step follows with the individual producing a response to the above-mentioned stressor. Individuals move into a process referred to as cognitive appraisal, which is when a person will consider the actual threat level that this stressor

holds towards them, and the current resources available to them to minimize, tolerate, or completely eradicate the stressor presented to them.

The two forms of appraisal of the stressor in this theoretical framework are primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. During the primary appraisal process, an individual goes through an internal process of deciding whether a situation is good or stressful, and how it might impact them—meaning what level of threat is this stressor producing. During the secondary appraisal process, an individual processes the internal feelings they have regarding the stressor and the coping resources available to them in order to cope with the stress. Individuals often have internal thoughts and feelings running through their minds as they attempt to process and come to a decision regarding how they will react to the stressor. These thoughts and feelings can include the following personal commentary: “I know I can do this”, “I am not sure about this, but I can at least try”, and “I have no chance, I know I will fail” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

This theory has been selected as the framework for the proposed study because the theory places an emphasis on the different reactions and experiences that individuals have to stress. A certain stressor may cause one individual’s stress bell to go off and alert them to a threat, while another person might not even acknowledge that same threat as any kind of a stressor. This framework will be a useful guide in understanding the different internal processes an individual goes through when looking at stressors versus the resources they have available to combat and cope with that stress.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to understand how current, traditional age first-year college students experience stress, and what they perceive their direct stressors to be

throughout their first semester in college. Further, this study aims to investigate what the students identify as coping mechanisms for stress. Through the process of this research project, I hope to gain an understanding of the participants' lived experiences in relation to stress and coping mechanisms. Thus, a phenomenological methodology will best fit the purpose of this study because the central focus of a phenomenological based research study is to allow the participant to speak freely about the experiences in which they have lived through (Van Manen, 2014). Utilizing a phenomenology-based approach will help to more clearly understand the experiences these first-year college students have regarding stress through the transition into college, and their personal perceptions of coping styles because this methodology is focused on understanding the lived experiences of a participant's life (Van Manen, 2014). Participants' were given the opportunity to speak freely about their own perceptions and life experiences.

Phenomenological Design. Phenomenology is a form of research methodology that is focused on an individual's personal lived experiences. Scotland (2012) described phenomenological based studies as being "directed at understanding phenomenon from an individual's perspective" (p. 12). Phenomenology is focused on wanting to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of an individual and for individuals to make meaning of their own experiences. I was able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participant's lived experiences in relation to stress and their individual ways of coping by utilizing this specific research methodology because the participant will have the opportunity to direct the conversation and fully express their thoughts, feelings, and emotions. This form of methodology also seeks to understand the emotional experiences that individuals have in a way that other research designs often cannot achieve (Merriam

& Tisdell, 2016). This study will investigate the phenomenon of stress and coping mechanisms in current, traditional-age, first-year college students and their perceptions and experiences during their transition into college primarily during their first semester.

Specifically, I want to focus on what this new generation of college students are experiencing in regard to stress and coping. There is a lack of research that focuses on “Generation Z” college students and how they experience stress during their first semester in college. Generation Z students are defined as anyone born in the year 1997 to present (“Defining generations”, 2019). To truly understand the lived experiences of these students, it is imperative that a phenomenological based research design be used because phenomenology focuses on lived experiences and allowing research participants’ to express their thoughts and feelings throughout the research process. This study aims to begin to fill in those gaps in the current literature and start the process of understanding a new generation of first-year college students.

Limitations

While this study is informational in discussing the experiences that the participants’ have lived through regarding stress and coping, it does have its limitations. To begin, four out of five of the participants’ for this study self-identified as cis-gender females, and the remaining participant identified as a cis-gender male. With only one male participant in this study, the male perspective regarding stress and coping within the first year of college is limited. In addition, the experiences for transgender and non-binary students are also not represented in this study as no participants’ with that identity volunteered to participate. This also limits the perspectives of this student population regarding their experiences with stress and coping. Further, four of the participants’ self-

identified as being a part of the Latinx community and the remaining participant self-identified as being White. With limited diversity regarding racial/ethnic identities, the experiences of other student ethnic populations were unable to be represented in this research study. The representation of diverse racial/ethnic identities is important because their personal experiences regarding stress and coping could be much different than the racial/ethnic identities that were discussed in this study.

The Student Success Program was largely recruited from for this study, four of the five participants' were students in the Student Success Program. The other participant had spent a lot of time in the [office] lounge and was very familiar with the department. Students in the Student Success Program have immediate resources to find their community when they arrive to campus. These students could have had a different experience throughout their first semester of college due to those resources as opposed to students who were not a part of a first-year experience program. The experiences with stress and coping could be different for students who did not have direct access to community building and other resources offered through the Student Success Program as the participants' in this study did. This limits the amount of different experiences able to be shown through this research study.

All of the interviews took place at the same institution located in the Midwest region of the United States. The location of this research study could have potentially limited the diversity of experiences of first-year college students as institutions in different regions of the United States offer different experiences that could not be portrayed in this thesis. This is important to note because the location of an institution impacts the experiences that an individual may have—especially if they are an out-of-

state college student and are moving to a new location that is different from their home environment.

Finally, due to time constraints and respect of the students who participated in this study, only two interviews were conducted throughout this research process. In traditional phenomenological research, there is a series of three interviews per participant (Seidman, 2006). The three-interview series is done in an attempt to allow both the participant and researcher to have time to process through each interview and build a better picture of the participant's lived experiences. The limited number of interviews reduces the time that was spent with each participant which limits the amount of data collected. However, the two interviews that were conducted provided an abundance of information regarding the lived experiences of each participant and their stress and coping mechanisms.

Chapter Summary

As stated above, the purpose of this research study was to gain a thorough understanding of traditional age first-year college student's perceptions of stress and coping. This research study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What do current traditional first-year college students perceive as stressors during their first year of college?
 - a. How do they experience stress?
2. What do traditional first-year college students identify as coping mechanisms?

Throughout chapter one, I introduced the main concepts and methodology of this research study. It is important to understand the effects that stress can have on college students and their mental health. As discussed earlier, stress can lead to a sharp decline in

the overall mental wellbeing of an individual. When this happens, their chances of developing depression, anxiety, or other mental illnesses increases (Coiro et al., 2016). The mental health of college students has experienced a sharp decline in recent years and as a result, research needs to be done to understand what these students are perceiving as their stressors. Further, understanding the coping process that first-year college students go through is also crucial to this research.

Traditional first-year college students will be between the ages of 17-19 and the decision-making process at this age is highly impaired due to an undeveloped frontal lobe in the brain that does not fully develop until an individual is approximately 25 years old (Dalton & Hammen, 2018). In order to help in the development of this research study, I will utilize a phenomenological based research design and conduct two semi-structured interviews with the participants'. These interviews will consist of asking the participants' about their perceptions of stress and what they believe coping to be. This research will help to further understand the experiences of traditional first-year college students regarding stress and coping.

In chapter two, I will delve deeper into the current literature surrounding this subject and the presented conceptual framework. The literature review will continue to analyze the importance of mental health for college students and the way that stress affects their wellbeing. Also, there will be further review of coping and the processes which college students undergo when faced with stressors. It will also be important to further discuss the differences between past and current generations regarding stress and coping. As mentioned above, there is a current lack of research that focuses on Generation Z, as it is the newest generation ("Defining generations", 2019). The

experiences between this generation and past generations are different and there is value to understanding what those differences are.

The conceptual framework will be based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. This model is of great value as it is focused on what an individual experiences when faced with stressors. Using this model as a framework for this study will help to understand the mental process that occurs when a traditional first-year college student experiences a stressor, and how they decide to cope with said stressor. Every individual will have different experiences and reactions when presented with stressors so using the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping will assist with understanding the internal processes an individual may go through. Chapter two will further analyze this conceptual framework and how it can be of value to this research study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter will focus on the current literature surrounding mental health, stress, and coping within traditional-age first-year college students. For purposes of this research study, a traditional aged first-year college students are between 17-19 years of age. To begin, general information will be provided in order to provide information on the current climate of mental health in first-year college students. This information will be useful as a foundation before moving into more specific areas of mental health and well-being. Following this will be a dedicated section surrounding stress in first-year college students. This section will discuss the effects that stress can have on an individual—specifically if the stress is for a prolonged duration of time. There will also be information regarding various causes of stress for first-year college students and why it is important to address the stress that these young individuals endure. It will also address the generational differences in stress that are found in Generation Z students. Generation ‘Z’ individuals are defined as anyone who was born between the year 1997 and the present year (“Defining generations”, 2019). A huge source of stress for new incoming college students is the transition to college. As this is a very stressful and confusing time for students, it is essential to address the issues that surround this subject and the effects that it can have on students’ mental health.

While there are many environmental and social factors that lead to stress for college students, one of the biggest influences of stress—particularly for first-year college students because of the newness—is academics. As students are transitioning into college, they soon realize that the academics are very different from high school as they

are more challenging and more demanding than they are accustomed too. Since academics is the reason for individuals to attend college, it can be extremely stress inducing for students to not be performing as well as they hoped or thought they would. As a result of the increase in stress, it is crucial to look at how first-year college students cope with their stress. At 17-19 years of age, the decision-making center of the brain is not fully developed, and this can have an effect on how well an individual can identify a healthy or unhealthy way of coping. Finally, this chapter will describe the conceptual framework that is being utilized for this research study. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress is the framework that this research study will be utilizing. This specific framework was chosen because it is focused on the process in which someone goes through when they are faced with a stressor and how they ultimately choose to cope with it.

General Information on Mental Health

While many individuals of the general population suffer from mental health challenges, individuals in college have higher rates of poor mental health (Kenney, Napper, Labrie, & Vaughn, 2018). In fact, the American College Health Association (2013) reported that approximately 45% of university students experienced feelings of hopelessness and depression while 51% of students experienced overwhelming feelings of anxiety. There is no clear reasoning as to why college students seem to struggle at higher rates than the general public, but many assume it to be a result of academic pressure. Further, research shows that first-year college students have the highest rates of poor mental health compared to all other college students (Chaló, Pereira, Batista, & Sancho, 2017). This increased level is attributed to all of the challenges and demands that

are associated with adapting to a new life and way of living. It is important to understand the severity of mental health challenges in the general public, but it is particularly important to understand these challenges in first-year college students because they are under such high levels of prolonged stress. An individual who endures stress for such a prolonged amount of time leads to decreased mental well-being, resulting in various mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression (Chaló, Pereira, Batista, & Sancho, 2017).

Further, first-year college students are at an increased risk of partaking in a variety of negative coping behavior as a result of their poor mental health. Behaviors such as substance abuse, violent behaviors, and even suicidal ideation are common in these students due to prolonged exposure to high levels of stress (Eisenbarth, 2019). While stress cannot be completely avoided, it can be maintained to allow healthy development in mental health for first-year college students. If the predictors for stress can be understood than that can be used to help these students to adjust more effectively to life at college and all that comes with it (Garett et al., 2017). Research has shown that students who are better able to cope with their stressed have an improved mental well-being as well as lower levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental disorders (Garett et al., 2017). Further, students show improved success in their academic performance and their ability to cope in a positive way leads to an overall more positive outlook on life.

Stress in First-Year College Students

While stress is a phenomenon that all individuals experience at different points in their lives, stress seems to be experienced at a higher rate for college students—particularly for first-year college students (Garett et al., 2017). When compared to upper

level undergraduate students at universities, first-year college students have significantly higher levels of stress and lowered levels of mental and emotional well-being as found by the American Freshmen National Norms Study (Garett et al., 2017). Going into college, students will encounter many new experiences that can lead to stress but there are some specific occurrences that have been reported as causing the most stress in college students. As first-year college students begin college, they are going through a significant transition as they move away from their homes and support systems. The level of pressure to perform at a high academic level can lead to lack of sleep, which adds more stress during this transition. Further, personal relationships tend to get more complicated for college students and at the age of a first-year student (17-19), strong coping skills have not been fully developed. First-year college students are particularly susceptible to high levels of stress and they often experience more prolonged amounts of stress than their upper-class counterparts do. This ongoing stress creates chronic, long-lasting stress for these young individuals, which aids in the development of unhealthy social relationships and the deterioration of their academics (Dvořáková et al., 2017).

High school is a completely different experience compared to college and there are more responsibilities placed on these individuals at a young age. Many of these young students are placed in charge of personal responsibilities for the first time such as waking up in time for classes, going to class, their nutrition, and doing laundry, hygiene. Also, first-year college students are displaced from their comfort zones and enter a new social environment with very little time to adjust before the pressure from academics kicks in (Dvořáková et al., 2017). As a result of the above-mentioned factors, it is clear that first-year college students experience extremely high levels of stress (Garett, Liu, & Young,

2017). In fact, a study conducted by Pierceall and Keim (2007) showed that up to 80% of first-year college students reported being moderately to severely stressed. When examining the differences between genders of first-year college students, research shows an overwhelming amount of evidence that women tend to experience higher levels of stress than men do (Pierceall & Keim, 2007). Furthermore, while women also tend to be more social, they also experience more social anxiety and higher levels of depression than men do (Pierceall & Keim, 2007). However, men show much higher levels of aggression than woman as a result of experiencing stress (Coccia, & Darling, 2014). It has also been found that female college students have a higher frequency of dealing with stressors related to their academics, financial issues, family problems, and personal problems (ACHA, 2018).

The ACHA (2018) found that a large portion of incoming college students struggle with symptoms of stress. These symptoms of stress are accompanied by feelings of being overwhelmed and extremely tired with a lack of energy. This heavy burden of stress has been identified as one of the top academic performance impact for college students (Eisenbarth, 2019). Further, as first-year college students attempt to deal with the sudden change in environment, they can experience feelings of loneliness which is another factor that causes a sharp increase in their stress levels (Ugurlu & Ona, 2009). With these feelings of loneliness and added stress, college students often experience difficulties trying to deal with their new life on a college or university campus—which continues to add stress to their mental health. The transition to college can be a vicious cycle of added stress as students encounter something new and are unsure how to adapt or deal with it (Ugurlu & Ona, 2009). A study by Chaló et al., (2017) found the increased

levels of stress and mental health challenges can often be higher in first-year college students because of all the new challenges and demands that are associated with starting college.

Students in this new generation are considered to have the highest levels of stress and lowest levels of overall emotional health in 25 years when compared to previous generations (American Psychological Association, 2015). These students are being exposed to chronic levels of stress for an extended amount of time and this is a major concern as this amount of chronic stress only causes further distress and mental health challenges, which can often lead to negative behaviors (Dvořáková et al., 2017). Having high life satisfaction is important for an individual to live a happy and well-balanced life. Life satisfaction also helps to support a stronger mental well-being. The stress that first-year college students are put under can be so severe that it can actually have an effect on an individual's satisfaction with their life (Coccia & Darling, 2014). Stress has been directly linked to the level of life satisfaction an individual experiences (Coccia & Darling, 2014). Therefore, when students are exposed to chronic and prolonged stress, they may experience decreased satisfaction with their life.

The Transition to College

The transition into college takes place at a point in these student's lives where they are reaching the end of their adolescence. The time throughout adolescence is marked by the extreme instability of emotions and inability to productively cope with their stressors (Chaló et al., 2017). Coupled with the end of this unstable time period and the entrance into college life—a time that brings continuous stress can often lead these first-year college students to experience increased levels of anxiety and depression. First-

year college students are faced with a variety of challenges and new experiences as they step foot on a university campus. These students are still at a developmental stage in their life and they move away from their support networks and are now forced to be in charge of themselves. This time between the development from adolescent into adulthood can be riddled with struggles and challenges which results in higher levels of stress (Jayalakshmi & Magdalin, 2015). Even though these students are just entering their first year of higher education, they are often thinking of the future and all of the responsibilities awaiting them. They are thinking of what type of job they will be able to secure with their chosen field of study, where they will end up building a life after graduation, and how they will pay for their student loans (Jayalakshmi & Magdalin, 2015). The pressure of these heavy thoughts and decisions can weigh exponentially on the mental well-being of a young college student. Also, these new students are away from their families for the first time in a new environment and that can cause a lot of stress. Research shows that female students can often struggle with being away from their families more than their male counterparts. Females tend to be more emotionally attached and dependent on their families and familiar support networks and this can have a negative impact on their autonomy (Diniz et al., 2016). Having a sense of autonomy is important for some first-year college students because they have to be responsible for themselves for the first time in their lives (Jayalakshmi & Magdalin, 2015). They must learn how to operate without being told what to do and when to do it and this is a huge change from their experiences in high school.

While the start of a college career can result in positive experiences for these young individuals, such as new opportunities for growth and growing their social circles,

it also presents them with a lot of changes very quickly. These students are now in charge of creating their own academic schedules and are responsible for completing their work successfully. Many students who were successful in high school believe that college will be similar in regard to academics. These students soon learn that this is often not the case and the transition into college level academics adds stress to their mental well-being (Denovan & Macaskill, 2012). Further, besides academics and the shift in their routines, first-year college students are often faced with financial struggles as well. As a result of the financial challenges, many first-year college students will find jobs in order to help put themselves through school—and some are even working 40 hours per week. While this seems like a responsible choice that will aid in their successful completion of college, adding in the extra responsibility of a job can negatively affect their academic success and mental well-being. Additionally, the types of relationships and interactions with faculty and staff is often much different than it was in high school, which is another area where first-year college students have to learn and adapt. There are some faculty and staff who are much more casual when it comes to their interactions with their students, while others stick to the formal relationships. It can be difficult for a new college student to be able to balance these different relationships on a day to day basis and can add stress (Raftu, 2017).

Another factor that can contribute to the stress first-year college students experience is the shifting in social norms as they enter college for the first time (Garett et al., 2017). Students begin to shift away from the support of their families and transfer that need for support onto their friends and peers. This can be problematic as peers are not always the best influence. Also, depending on where these first-year college students are

moving from, the college campus can be a social shock to them (Raftu, 2017)—especially if they are moving from a very rural town to a large campus and vice versa. First-year college students can struggle as they attempt to find their place on a new college campus, especially if it is very different from their hometown culture. It can be overwhelming and stressful to be placed in a new environment and not have the support network they are used to having as those support networks help reduce the amount of stress an individual experiences.

Social support can also help when it comes to coping with stressful situations, and new college students can struggle with the absence of that familiar support (Shukla & Joshi, 2017). The social aspects of transitioning to college can be extremely overwhelming and can lead to increased amounts of support for new students or decreased levels of support because they are away from their family and friends. A study by Coccia and Darling (2014), found that social support plays a huge role in the adjustment to college. The more social support a student has, the better they seem to adjust to a new life at college. Quan, Zhen, and Yao (2014) found that loneliness has a huge impact on how successful the transition to college is for first-year college students. When a student experiences loneliness, they often begin to adopt an overall negative vision of their environment and lose interest in things that normally bring positive feelings to them. Loneliness can be a huge problem for some students as it has the ability to cause problems for their academics and their well-being while at college.

Academics and Stress

As discussed above, students entering their first year of college go through a number of changes at a quick pace. These changes often cause a rise in the student's

stress levels which can lead to a disruption in other areas of their lives—such as their academics. Two of the biggest negative contributors to poor academic achievement are stress and depression as these symptoms tend to be much higher in college students compared to the general population (Iorga, Dondas, & Zugun-Eloae, 2018). The first year of college for a student is incredibly critical for the retention and success of their overall college career (Valadas, Almeida, & Araújo, 2016). In fact, it is reported that college students who are not progressing in their degree completion attributed this to stress-related problems that they dealt with during the first year of college (Denovan & Macaskill, 2012). Because of this, it is important that students are able to maintain a healthy mental well-being, so they are able to be successful in their academics. Due to the sharp change in environment as a first-year college student moves to campus, their adjustment will not be instant and mental health issues are a result of this transition period (Quan et al., 2014). First-year college students will go through a period referred to as “academic adjustment”. As defined by Feng and Li (2002), academic adjustment is a process that involves both psychological and behavioral changes as first-year college students attempt to adjust and find a new balance in a new academic environment. It also involves these students trying to learn and meet new academic requirements and teaching styles that are present at a university (Quan et al., 2014).

One major predictor for stress in first-year college students and their academic performance is their time-management skills (Garett et al., 2017). As most traditional-age, first-year college students are fresh out of high-school, they often are not equipped with the quality time-management skills that are necessary to be successful in a college environment. In high-school, students follow a very strict routine and much of their time

is scheduled for them without their own input. When thinking about homework, much of the homework (about 80%) in high-school is completed during the school day while in college, the bulk of the homework is done on student's own time and only about 20 percent of it is done during class time (Garett et al., 2017). Due to this new academic adjustment, there is a variety of challenges that may present themselves for first-year college students. As students struggle to find a new balance and adjust to the new learning and academic requirements of a college university, they could suffer in regard to their social functioning and engagement, as well as experience lower self-esteem if they feel they are behind their peers developmentally, academically, and in the adjustment to college (Quan et al., 2014).

The feeling of possibly being behind their peers academically can be a huge stressor for first-year college students—especially if that student was at the top of their class in high school. Many students who were successful academically in high school often have the mentality that this success will automatically transfer over to college. It is not uncommon for these students to try and use the same processes that they used in high school in their college classes to attempt to earn high grades (Valadas et al., 2016). The reality is that academics within a collegiate setting are much different than that of high school and many first-year college students develop a lot of stress as they try and adapt to that change. In fact, the levels of stress that first-year college students experience related to their academic achievement can have a huge influence on their future college career. It is reported that 25 percent of college students will drop out during or after their first year due to the stress that they have experienced (Coccia & Darling, 2014).

One factor that can be a cause of increased stress and lead to this high dropout rate is the level of academic satisfaction these students personally feel. Academic satisfaction is an important factor for lowered levels of stress, and it is often related to how involved a student is with their academics. The more involved a student is with their academics—meaning participation in class and their dedication to their studies outside of class—the higher their overall satisfaction with college will be. This satisfaction will help lead to lower levels of stress (Valadas et al., 2016). It is also commonly known that many college students do not get much sleep, and this is often due to the academic pressure they experience. Academics are a one of the top causes of stress for college students, and this is particularly high for first-year college students because they are still just beginning to adjust to the academic demands of college level courses. College students almost always have very irregular patterns of sleep and this is important because the number of hours of sleep an individual gets has been linked to their overall health and levels of stress (Coccia & Darling, 2014).

Coping Behaviors of First-Year College Students

As traditional first-year college students are most often between the ages of 17-19, their brains are not yet fully developed. In particular, their frontal lobe—which is in charge of decision making—is not fully developed until about the age of 25 (Johnson, Blum, & Giedd, (2009). As a result of this underdeveloped portion of the brain, individuals this age often struggle to make well rounded decisions. This lack of strong decision-making skills can play a significant role in how someone might choose to cope with a particular situation. College students in today's society struggle at a much higher rate with their mental health than past generations have and dealing with mental health

challenges is extremely important to the future well-being of an individual's health (Liu et al., 2017). First-year college students are particularly susceptible to mental health illnesses because of the sharp increase in stress they endure as they transition into college life. The challenges of leaving their families and support networks and moving to a new environment adds an abundance of stress and dealing with it is not always simple.

There are two main ways in which an individual can seek help for their mental health. The first, and often more common, is to reach out to family and friends to talk through issues. The second, and much less likely, is for an individual to seek professional help to cope with their issues. Studies have shown that a very low percentage of college students opted to seek professional care for their mental health (Liu et al., 2017). Even though one out of three of incoming first-year college students reported they had experienced some form of mental health challenge in their life, only about one out of five of those students stated they have received some kind of professional treatment (Benjet et al., 2018). The reason for the low rate of college students seeking professional mental health care is not entirely known but it is thought to be largely due to the stigma that surrounds mental health. It is not uncommon for first-year college students to believe that they will not be accepted by their friends and their peers if they were to know the individual was seeking professional care (Benjet et al., 2018). Due to this stigma concern, college students tend to opt to solve their own issues by themselves instead of reaching out for help. Individuals often fear that if their peers or family members found out they were seeking professional mental health care, they would assume there was something wrong with them. As a result of this fear, it is not uncommon for individuals to attempt to deal with the issues on their own, or completely ignore that there are issues present (Liu

et al., 2017). Also, due to the progression of internet use in this new generation of first-year college students, the internet has actually become a place where individuals seek ways to “self-help” themselves by using the online access to find resources (Saleh, Camart, Sbeira, & Romo, 2018). In regard to the students who do choose to seek help, female students are much more likely to go out and receive help from a professional for their stress and mental health (Locke et al., 2016). Over the past few years, campus mental health services have reported an increase demand for their services, as well as an influx of students seeking these services (Locke et al., 2016).

Studies have shown that there is an increasingly negative attitude towards seeking professional care for mental health issues within the college student population and as a result, there has been a sharp decline in the amount of college students who want to seek care for their well-being (Diniz et al., 2016). Other studies have also found that the longer and more severe an individual suffers with poor mental health, the less likely they will want to seek help due to a negative stigma of professional care (Liu et al., 2017). College students may attempt to deal with their stress in as positive ways that they can, but the biggest issue is that as a first-year student, they simply do not always know the best ways in which to cope. This inability to cope in a positive manner ultimately leads these students to adopt more unhealthy ways to cope with their stress (Diniz et al., 2016).

One of the most common negative coping styles is through the use of alcohol. Substance abuse has increasingly become a true concern for administrators on college campuses (Locke et. al., 2016). According to the NSDUH report from 2014, almost 60 percent of college students used alcohol with approximately 39 percent reporting binge drinking. The influx of students coping with their stress by drinking alcohol can

sometimes be the result of peer pressure or the desire to impress one's peers. It is not uncommon for peers to shape the way in which an individual makes decisions regarding behaviors such as drinking (Massengale, Ma, Rulison, Milroy, & Wyrick, 2016). Further, many students attempt to cope with their stress through self-harm. The most common form of self-harm is cutting but other behaviors such as scratching, purposely causing bruises, burning oneself, and at times breaking bones are always ways of coping for some students (Locke et al., 2016). The biggest reason these negative behaviors tend to occur is because first-year college students have not yet fully developed their frontal cortex which is in charge of judgment and decision-making skills (Johnson et al., 2009). Without that maturity and development, students are unsure how to cope with their stressors in a positive and healthy manner.

Conceptual Framework

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress was the chosen conceptual framework for this research project. The basis of this theory is that individuals are presented with a stressor from their environment and they must evaluate their current coping resources to determine how they will react to said stressor. This framework helps to create a process for how individuals assess and deal with stress that they have been presented with. This specific framework describes stress as a two-step process in which an individual will go through two forms of appraisal. Primary appraisal is when someone goes through internal processes of determining whether a presented situation poses a threat to them or not—this threat is stress, as well as how said threat may impact them. An individual will be presented with a situation from their environment and they must then internally process if the situation is good or if it is stressful and how threatening this

situation is to them. This entire process takes place during primary appraisal. Once an individual has gone through primary appraisal, they will then move into secondary appraisal. Secondary appraisal consists of the individual assessing what resources they currently possess to help them deal with the stress. Further, they will also process through their internal feelings regarding the stressor during this stage. During secondary appraisal, it is not uncommon for individuals to have negative self-thoughts when analyzing their present coping resources. If they feel they are lacking something that would help them cope more effectively, they could develop thoughts of inadequacy.

According to this theory, stress is the result of an individual having more stress and demands than they have coping resources. When an individual does not have adequate resources for coping, they will be unable to properly cope when their environment presents them with a stressor. Further, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified two main styles of coping—problem focused and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping is when an individual is able to deal with the problem at hand with a focused thought process while emotion-focused coping is when an individual focuses more on their emotions regarding a situation as opposed to the actual problem. Research has shown that those who are able to cope with a more problem-focused style often have a more positive outlook. However, it is not uncommon for first-year college students to cope with a more emotion-focused style as their brains have not yet fully developed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This framework fits well with the proposed study as the targeted participants' are first-year college students and are presented with various stressors from their environment almost daily. Using this framework will help to assess how these students function with their stress and current coping resources.

Chapter Summary

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed the current literature related to first-year college students and their perceptions of stress and coping. To start, I began talking about general information regarding mental health in college students. Mental health issues have been on the rise overall in the last few years, but the issues seem to be highest in college students—particularly in first-year college students (Garett et al., 2017). In fact, research has shown that first-year college students have the worst rates of poor mental health (Chaló et al., 2017). This is often attributed to all of the sudden changes that these young individuals go through as they begin the transition to college. As a young 17-19-year-old student, the sudden change in environment and familiar support networks can create an abundance of stress that is often not dealt with in positive ways due to their brains not being fully matured yet. As first-year college students attempt to adjust to their change in environment, they are also dealing with a change in academic requirements. The work load and expectations in high school curriculum are vastly different to those in higher education and first-year college students often struggle with this sudden change as they are not familiar with what is expected of them. It can be made even worse if these students begin to feel as if they are behind their peers. This added stress of feeling behind can lead to feelings of inadequacy which often results in more stress (Quan et al., 2014).

Tuition and student fees have also risen in the past few years which results in more of the financial burden being placed on the student to pay for college. While some students are able to rely on their parents to help close the financial gap, there are many students whose families are unable to help them pay for school. As a result of that, first-year college students are made responsible to pay their tuition and must get a job to make

the needed money. Some of these students are working up to 40 hours a week in order to get through school (Denovan & Macaskill, 2012). While getting a job can help students with their time management skills and developing responsibilities, working full-time while also going to school full-times an abundance of stress that is not easily dealt with. When thinking about academics, the stress of working up to full-time can have a hugely negative impact on a student's academic success.

Academics seem to be one of the largest stress areas for first-year college students. They are unfamiliar with the expectations of a college curriculum and are now entirely responsible for getting their work done on time. As opposed to high school when students have their teachers and parents to remind them to complete their homework, students in college no longer have that support system and it is up to them to be responsible for their own academic success. First-year college students will often attempt to use the same strategies as they did in high school to earn good grades in college and they soon realize that this level of academia is completely different than anything they have encountered thus far (Valadas et al., 2016). Students are used to completing up to 80 percent of their required studying and homework in the classroom and it comes as a great shock that in college, only about 20 percent of studying and homework is completed in class. The bulk of work is done outside of class and students often struggle to hold themselves accountable enough to complete their work on time. The first year of college is crucial and very telling of a student's collegiate future. Academic success in the first year of college is very important as 25 percent of college students will drop out in their first year (Coccia & Darling, 2014).

With stress comes the necessity for strong coping skills—unfortunately, as first-year college students are usually between the ages of 17-19, they often do not have the necessary brain development to make the best decisions for strong coping skills. Students are likely to cope in one of two ways—problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping leads to more positive results as it entails the individual focusing on the actual problem at hand while emotion-focused coping often leads to more negative results because individuals will focus more on their emotions instead of the problem. First-year college students are much more likely to utilize an emotion-focused way of coping because their emotions often cloud their judgment (Liu et al., 2017). As this new generation of students has had much more contact with the internet than previous generations, students who are dealing with stress often turn to the internet to attempt to “self-help” instead of talking with friends or seeking professional care (Saleh et al., 2018). There seems to be a huge stigma attached to professional care and students can feel worried that they will be outcasted by their peers if they seek professional care to deal with their stress and mental well-being (Liu et al., 2017).

The framework that was used in this study is Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. This theory states that individuals develop stress through a two-step process. The first step is for an individual to be presented with a certain situation from their environment. They will then analyze the presented situation and determine if it is a stressor not. If deemed a stressor, the individual will then assess to what level this stress threatens them and what are the current coping resources available. This framework works well for the present study as both are focused on stress and coping and the processes that go along with both factors.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss the chosen methodology and methods for this study as well as the research design and data collection methods. This research study was based on a phenomenological method. The focus of phenomenology is to gain a true understanding of a participant's lived experiences. Chapter 3 focuses on discussing the methods that were chosen to conduct this research study. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress was used as a foundational framework for this study. This framework provides a pathway to understand the way in which stress can affect an individual and the internal processes an individual goes through to cope with said stress. I also present the reasoning for using the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping for this study and how it supports my research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

Mental health issues appear to be more prevalent in today's society and particularly for college students. Having large amounts of stress takes a heavy toll on the health of an individual's mental state. Consequently, understanding the experiences that first-year college students have in regard to stress and coping is important. If there is a better understanding of how stress affects these young college students, this could help prevent mental health issues starting at such a young age because there will be more knowledge as to what causes such issues. Preventive measures can be put in place as more information regarding what leads to mental health challenges in young college students. Further, understanding generational differences in the college experience will also help to strengthen the help and support that can be offered to combat deteriorating mental health in first-year college students. There is a current lack of literature pertaining to Generation Z college students and their state of mental health. Students in Generation Z are experiencing a new world as compared to previous generations and that shift in experience crosses over with the college experience.

The purpose of this research study was to gain an understanding of traditional first-year college student's experiences in regard to stress and ways of coping. For the purpose of this study, traditional first-year college students are between the ages of 17-19 and they have not attended any other college or university prior to their participation in this research study. Specifically, this research study looked at how and what first-year college students perceive to be stressors in their lives as well as the different coping styles they utilize to relieve stress. The research questions for this research study were:

1. What do current traditional first-year college students perceive as stressors during their first year of college?
 - a. How do they experience stress?"
2. What do traditional first-year college students identify as coping mechanisms?

These two research questions were chosen to enable the opportunity to gain perspective into the participants' lives as it relates to their perceived stress and coping styles.

Researcher Positionality

Mental health issues have surrounded me since I was a child. Many people in my family have suffered from issues with their mental health—depression being the most prevalent issue. When I was 17 years old, my mother was diagnosed with depression and anxiety. This diagnosis happened right before I moved to college and I was beginning to understand how prevalent and how much of an issue mental health was in our family. The diagnosis my mom received was particularly hard for me to process because I watched the depression and anxiety change my mom into a person I no longer recognized. It was one of the most challenging times for our whole family, and now almost six years later, it has been a continuous struggle. During my sophomore year of college, I began to develop anxiety—seemingly out of nowhere. I started to find that I would get anxious and extremely overwhelmed and stressed out from almost anything. I began to lose my passion for education and became uninterested in things that I once use to love. I am 23 years old now and just recently received a diagnosis for Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

My passion and curiosity for mental health has truly blossomed during the height of my struggle with anxiety, because I wanted to know why and how I developed anxiety.

I have come to realize that a lot of it stemmed from the most stressful time of my life—the heart of when my mom’s mental health was at its worst. Before this, I had often thought of myself as someone who could handle stress—someone who was successful even when stressed out. After much reflection, I realized that was not the case for me. I do not thrive off of stress—stress thrives off of me and I struggle with that. My interest in stress in first-year college students stems from my curiosity regarding mental health issues as a whole. Further, I realized that I, myself, did not have good coping mechanisms when I was an undergraduate student—but I perceived them to be productive coping styles at the time. This sparked the interest in how traditional age, first-year college students cope with their stress.

I believe that my position as someone who has been “in the shoes” of these students and remembers how it feels to be a first-year student and dealing with the stress of the transition to college gave me the advantage of connecting and building rapport with the participants’ of the study on a different level than a researcher who has been out of college for quite some time. As an individual who understands the weight that stress can have, I believe this allowed the participants’ to feel more comfortable speaking about such personal topics. However, my passion for wanting to discover answers to mental health issues in college students could have hampered or influenced the study in some ways. A possible disadvantage my position as a researcher could have on this study is that, because I am so determined to find answers, it is possible that I might see themes in the participants’ responses that are not actually there. Also, it is likely my personal experience with mental health issues influenced the data collection process and how I analyzed the data. I addressed those issues by reflecting consistently on the research

process and my influence as well as implementing various strategies to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study.

During this study, I focused on gaining more information on the experiences these college students have in regard to stress and coping. Mental health is an extremely large and broad area to attempt to study and would require a longer time period than is currently available. Therefore, through my study I hoped to discover key areas of stress for college students and the experiences they have as well as how they cope.

Research Design

The purpose of a phenomenological based research design is to form an understanding of a person's lived experiences. A phenomenological method distinguishes itself from other research designs because of the relationship that is often built between the researcher and the participants'. Looking through the lenses of phenomenology, the purpose of research is to always acknowledge and appreciate the different ways in which we experience the world and to want to know the world in the different ways people experience it (Van Manen, 2014). Essentially, a researcher who is using a phenomenological based research design wants to become a part of the participant's world and see the participant's personal experiences from their perspectives. One of the biggest factors that differentiates phenomenology from other research methodologies is that it is always focused on the experiences and phenomenon's that people are currently living—it is focused on the living world (Van Manen, 2014). For this reason, a phenomenological based research design was chosen as the foundation for this research study because I wanted to gain a true understanding of each of the participant's lived experiences.

A phenomenological design was used for this research project in order to form an understanding of the different life experiences of the participants'. Based on the phenomenological design, the use of interviews as the main form of data collection was chosen as the most appropriate choice as interviewing allows direct access to the participants' lived experiences of phenomenon or interest area (i.e. first-year college students and stress), which is central to phenomenology (Vagle, 2009).

Conceptual Framework

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping served as the conceptual framework for this study. This model is based on the theory that stress is the result of a two-step process that individuals go through. Individuals are presented with a stressor from their environment (step one) and then they form a response based upon the presented stressor (step two). This model was chosen as the conceptual framework because of the emphasis that is placed on the individual's personal processes and reactions when they are faced with a stressor. The purpose of this research study was to understand what traditional first-year college students perceive as stressors, as well as how they describe their coping styles and attempt to manage those stressors. This framework complements the research design because it focuses on the processes in which an individual goes through to assess and cope with their stressors. As the framework describes, the participants' were asked to describe stressors that their environment presented them with and then how their internal processes reacted to those stressors. This model describes an internal process where an individual tries to determine if a situation is stressful or not—and then the level of impact that the situation will have on them. That specific facet of the theory was important for me to be aware of when conducting the

participant interviews because I was able to identify this process as the participants' were describing their stressors.

Further, after individuals have been presented with a stressor and have determined the level of impact it will have on them, they then go through the internal process of examining what coping resources are presently available to them. Understanding this facet of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping was particularly useful through the data analysis portion of this research study which will be described in detail later. This framework was used in order to help further understand the internal processes the participants' go through as they deal with stress and coping.

Participant Recruitment and Selection. At the time of participant selection and recruitment, I worked as a 2nd year Graduate Assistant in a university multicultural center at a large public predominantly White institution in the Midwest. Potential participants' were recruited through a student success program and course that is coordinated through the multicultural center. Students were recruited through a personal Canvas announcement (see Appendix A) that I posted in each of the individual seminar sections with information regarding the study. The students who volunteered to participate in this study were traditional-age first-year college students participating in the Student Success Program. The Student Success Program is a one-year program that focuses on supporting incoming first-year college students through their first year of higher education. The program includes a 10-week seminar course during the fall semester. This seminar course aims to provide information about time management, study skills, goal setting, current events, diversity awareness, and social engagement.

During the seminar course, students complete a variety of assignments that help them get acclimated to the multicultural center and staff and the campus as a whole. A few of the larger, more time-consuming assignments include: a scavenger hunt that requires the students to come to the Multicultural Center, which is where the office is housed. The scavenger hunt has a list of 10 questions about the different staff members and questions about center as a whole. The goal of this assignment is to get the students into our building and learn more about the staff. The campus resource project is a group assignment that requires each group to go visit a different resource center on campus and make a three-minute presentation for the class. Lastly, the diversity reflection assignment is a three-page paper that each student will write about a different current event topic (e.g., gun control, immigration, abortion, etc.). Students in the success program are also required to attend three diversity events during each semester. This requirement is meant to help the students with their diversity awareness and social engagement. To help the students develop their time management and study skills, the students are required to track and complete six study hours. Three of these hours must be done in the center's tutoring center, and the remaining three are to be completed in any campus resource center, inside the building, or in the library. Finally, all study hours must be signed off by a staff member where they were recorded.

Participation in the Student Success Program happens in one of two ways. First, if a student receives any of the scholarships that the office provides—either full or partial scholarships—they are required to take this course in order to keep their scholarship. The second avenue of student recruitment for the success program is through personal interest. If a student selects on their college application that they are interested in

diversity and inclusion or if they mark that they are a first-generation student or a minority, they are scheduled to meet with the staff on their scheduled New Student Enrollment (NSE) day. New Student Enrollment is a day when new students come to the University to enroll in classes and have meetings with any offices in which they will participate in as college students. During the student's meeting with center's staff, the student receives information regarding the different events that the center plans for students to attend, the Study Studio that offers free tutoring for all students on campus is and the student success program. After receiving all of the information, the student can decide if they would like to enroll in the seminar course.

A purposeful sampling technique was utilized for this research project. A purposeful sampling is used when the researcher wants to purposefully select participants' that meet certain characteristics they are looking for in their particular study (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2013). For my research study, I purposefully recruited traditional age first-year college students as that was the population I was targeting for my research. I aimed to have between 6 and 12 participants' for this research study and understand the student's stress and coping mechanisms in traditional aged (ages 17-19) first-year college students in their first semester at a Midwestern, 4-year research institution. There was no specific gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, ability status, socioeconomic status, or other social identities that were considered for identifying and recruiting participants'. I intentionally chose not to recruit any participants' from the section of the Student Success Program that I was teaching. This was done to prevent any ethical concerns related to the dual relationship of instructor and researcher. I focused my recruiting efforts on the students in

one of the eight other seminar sections that was taught by a different staff member. However, participation was not limited to only seminar students and was open to other traditional-age, first-year college students on campus. The participants' included five traditional age, first-year college students with a variety of demographic information that was collected through the online electronic consent form (Appendix B). Please see table 1 for demographic information of participants'.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Major	Stress Level
Bob	18	Female	Latino	Undeclared	6/10
X	18	Male	Cuban-Mexican	Microbiology	8/10
Ana	18	Female	Hispanic	Interior Design	7/10
M	19	Female	White	Music Education	9/10
Renee	18	Female	Hispanic	Civil Engineering	4/10

*Note: All participants' participated in both interviews

Data Collection

Phenomenological research designs are focused on acquiring information on the lived experiences and perspectives of a participant's life (Scotland, 2012) and it is common practice that the participants' and researchers have a closer connection that is not found in other forms of research. With phenomenology, the main form of data collection is through the use of interviews. Interviews allow the researcher to build a rapport with the participant and allow them to feel comfortable to open up about the experiences they have lived through. So, conducting in-person interviews was the most

consistent data collection method with the phenomenological methodology because it allowed me as the researcher to form a strong rapport with the participants' and allow for a much more natural flow of conversation.

The primary data collection strategy for this research study was two semi-structured interviews. Two separate interviews were conducted individually to allow both the researcher and participant time to process through the first interview and identify any subject area that might need some more time devoted to it and also to process and reflect, as the experiences participants' discussed in the first interviews might have been potentially sensitive. This form of research methodology was chosen because as the researcher, I wanted to build a true understanding of the life experiences that research participants' have gone through as well as strengthen and cultivate the relationship between the participants' and myself.

Each participant met with me for two one-on-one, semi-structured interviews that lasted between 45-60 minutes. In these interviews, I asked them a series of questions related to their perceptions of stress and coping mechanisms (see Appendix C). This study utilized Seidman's (2006) interview format, known as the *Details of Experience*, which served as a guiding framework for the interview process for this study. This way of interviewing is designed to gain information from the participants' concentrating on a specific area of study that is chosen by the researcher. Researchers do not ask the participant's opinions about different subjects but instead asks that the participants' discuss their own personal lived experiences with a specific phenomenon or interest area in mind. For the interviews, I used a semi-structured approach to interviewing. The semi-structured approach created a foundation for a conversation between the participants' and

the researcher but also allowed the participants' to have some control on the direction of the conversation. Allowing the participants' to lead the direction of the interviews is an integral aspect to keeping true to a phenomenological based research design as they spoke about their personal experience (Van Manen, 2014).

The interview protocol was designed to inquire about what participants' perceive to be stressors in their lives as first-year college students and their perceptions of coping mechanisms. Questions about how participants' interact with social media were included in the interview protocol because social media use is a common practice in most of these students' lives and likely influences how they experience stress. Follow-up questions were asked in some interviews to clarify or expand on information that participants' discussed. Each interview process ranged between 45 and 60 minutes and this strengthened the level of engagement with each participant and allowed me as the researcher to gather more meaningful, in-depth data. Participants' received no monetary compensation for their participation. Finally, the interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participants'. I then transcribed the audio recordings verbatim for data analysis purposes and to identify thematic findings. All of the participants' signed an informed consent form acknowledging they understand the requirements of the study and authorizing the voice recording of their conversations. This was done to allow the researcher to place their full attention on what the participant was discussing so that details were not overlooked. I also took notes during the interview process to highlight and note particularly relevant information and other information pertinent to the purpose of this study.

Interview one focused on some general information about each participant as well as the participant's personal experiences with stress and what they perceive to be stressors for their lives. Specifically, questions were asked inquiring about what a typical day is like for the participant and how they would describe themselves as a college student. Other questions for this interview focused on how stress has changed in the student's life since they began college and what they considered to be stressors for them. Also, as noted earlier, since this is a new generation of college students and the experiences that they may be different than previous generations—especially regarding social media use—there is a question about the stress that social media may add to their life. Interview two focused on the student's self-identified coping styles. This interview started out by asking the participant how they typically have dealt with stress and moved into asking them simply, "What is coping?" They were also asked questions relating to what they would describe as both healthy and unhealthy coping mechanisms. Interview two also focused on asking the participants' what they would do to cope if their typical coping mechanisms were not helping in a stressful situation. Participants' also described a particularly stressful situation that they had dealt with that was a result of beginning college. The purpose of interview two and this line of questioning was to gauge what the participants' believed coping to be and also examples of what they thought was a healthy and an unhealthy way of coping.

Data Analysis

The participant interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Once the interviews had been transcribed, I reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy by reading through them fully while also listening to the audio-recorded interviews. This

process was completed twice to ensure accuracy of the transcriptions and check for any mistakes. After the transcriptions were completed and checked for accuracy, the participants' were given the opportunity to read through their personal transcriptions to check for accuracy. The participants' were given the option to meet with me as the researcher to go over their transcriptions if they chose to, however, none of the participants' responded to my email communication. Throughout the transcription process, I also began to analyze any common themes that I discovered in the data by looking for commonalities between what the participants' described their experiences to be. This reflective process helped me code the data later on and group together themes that were found.

Data analysis was conducted through the use of initial coding and pattern coding. Initial coding is described as when a researcher analyzes and breaks down the data in order to find commonalities or similarities between the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The use of initial coding is the first cycle of data analysis for this research study. Following the initial coding, pattern coding was also used. Pattern coding is the second cycle of data analysis. Pattern coding uses the basic categories created during initial coding to further break down the presented data and group them together into common themes (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). Through this data analysis process, I identified four themes that represented how participants' made meaning of their experiences with stress and coping during their first semester in college.

Trustworthiness

The basis of trustworthiness is formed on the foundation of four key areas: truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Truth value is

the level to which the researcher can establish confidence in the truthfulness of the research findings. Applicability is how an individual can determine the extent to which the findings can be applicable in other contexts. Consistency is the level to which the findings of a particular research study can be replicated if the researcher were to do the same (or similar) study with the same research participants' (or similar participants').

For this research study, I strengthened trustworthiness by utilizing several different methods. To begin, I engaged in peer debriefing to address validity of the findings. Peer debriefing is meant to incorporate an unbiased peer into the research to help the researcher further reflect on the study (Miles et al., 2014). The importance of peer debriefing is to incorporate a peer that is not related to the present research study. This allowed the unbiased peer to assist the researcher in working through their thoughts and the results of the research study. I had regular meetings with a doctoral candidate in the Educational Administration program who acted as my peer debriefer. This candidate has research focus areas in campus racial climate incidents at predominantly White institutions, underrepresented populations in higher education, and university presidency. She is a former mid-level student affairs professional and has designed first-year programs and initiatives. During these meetings, we discussed the progress of my study and how I could continue to improve the accuracy of my work. The process of peer debriefing was helpful in my research process because it allowed a non-bias individual to help me process through my thoughts and reflect on my personal biases as they came up.

Along with peer debriefing, I engaged in member checking. Member checking involves sharing portions of the study with the participants' in order to ensure that the researcher has understood the participant's point of view correctly (Miles et al., 2014).

Each participant received a summary of the findings after both interviews were conducted but did not respond to the inquiry. While participants' did not respond to the inquiry, if a third interview had been conducted, this would have allowed the opportunity for potential member checking to be done. Finally, throughout the data collection and analysis process, I utilized journal reflection as a way to process through the progress of my research. This is important to the bridling process and allowed me to reflect on my own biases. Bridling is the process of being aware of one's own biases and being able to restrain those before, during, and after the research process. It also entails the researcher not making assumptions or conclusions regarding aspects of the data that are not proven (Dahlberg, 2006).

I also created trustworthiness through my prolonged engagement with this research study and by creating an audit trail. I created an audit trail through utilizing Halpern's six audit trail categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I kept raw data including the audio recorded participant interviews as well as the notes I took during the interviews. Further, I kept materials related to intentions and dispositions of this research study including my IRB proposal and research prospectus. Instrument development information was also kept and organized. This material includes the online electronic consent form, Canvas page announcement for participant recruitment, and the emails I sent the participants' to remind them of their scheduled interviews.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical practices are all very important aspects to consider and practice when conducting research—especially when that research includes human participants'. For this project, a major part of the ethical practices centered on maintaining participants''

anonymity, as the subject matter included some very personal topics. The topic of stress, social media, and healthy and unhealthy coping mechanisms were triggering for some individuals, and therefore, it was of the utmost importance that their personal identities were not disclosed to anyone and ethically prudent to provide resources and referrals for mental health services and support. To protect identities, no identifying characteristics were stated or implied throughout the transcripts. The participants' signed an electronic consent form where they indicated their preferred pseudonym. While the consent form did have their real name listed, these forms were only accessible by the principal researcher and were stored on a password protected Box account. Thus, allowing the participants' to review the transcripts is a strong way to ensure that the research study and the findings are valid, as well as, giving the opportunity to avoid notable errors that might impact the quality of the research.

In order to support reliability and validity, bridling was used. The purpose of bridling was to separate any biases or assumptions of the researcher from the results of the research study in order to prevent influence on the participants' or their responses as much as possible (Fischer, 2009). Bridling is also largely used in phenomenological research because it is important for the researcher to be aware of their own personal biases as to not let those affect the current phenomenon being investigated, as well as any prior knowledge one might possess about said phenomenon (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). I utilized bridling throughout this research process in order to process through my own personal biases or assumptions I had regarding the research phenomenon.

Chapter Summary

Chapter three has focused on the research design and methodology that was used for this research study. The purpose of this research study was to form an understanding of traditional first-year college student's experiences in regard to stress and ways of coping. The desire to learn about an individual's life and the experiences they have lived through is the foundation for a phenomenological based research design—which I utilized for this research project. There is a gap in the research on mental health relating to college students—especially with this newer generation of students. The purpose of this research study was to help begin filling those gaps and providing important information regarding stress and coping within first-year college students.

The participants' took part in two interviews—one focusing on their perceptions of stress and the second interview focusing on their coping styles. Both of these interviews were necessary to be able to form a firm understanding of both their stressors, the ways in which they cope, and how they made meaning of those experiences. Data collected from those interviews were then analyzed and thematic findings were identified through the data analysis process. Additionally, several steps were taken to strengthen the trustworthiness of this study including peer review, member checking, and bridling.

In chapter four, I will delve into the findings of this research project. I will present my findings regarding traditional first-year college student's perceptions regarding stress and personal coping mechanisms. Chapter four will present further information on the participants' of the study and give more insight into each of their personal experiences. Further, the themes that emerged throughout themselves throughout the data analysis process will be discussed in detail to provide a picture of what the participant's life experiences have been in regard to stress and coping mechanisms.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of what traditional-age, first-year college students perceive and experience as stressors during their first semester in college. Further, this study sought to investigate what the participants' perceived as coping mechanisms for stress. The participants' for this study were traditional age—meaning between 17-19 years of age, first-year college students. Participants' had not attended any other college or university prior to this research study. In an effort to gain an understanding of the participants' experiences, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What do current traditional first-year college students perceive as stressors during their first year of college?
 - a. How do they experience stress?
2. What do traditional first-year college students identify as coping mechanisms?

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim after the participant interviews had concluded. Following this process, I then analyzed the transcription data for common themes based on the experiences the participants' described. This allowed me to develop my thematic findings which I describe in detail later in this chapter. Four key themes emerged from the data gathered from the participants' of this study with a variety of sub-themes that helped to understand the various life experiences the participants' have had related to stress and coping in college. The following themes help to provide insight into what the participants' experienced in regard to stress and coping throughout the first semester of their college career.

Introduction to participants’. All five of the participants’ who volunteered for this study were 18 or 19 years of age and were enrolled as a full-time student in an undergraduate program. The participants’ were all interviewed in a private office room at the institution. This was done to ensure that the participants’ had privacy and could freely speak without fear of being overheard. Four out of five participants’ identified as Latino or Hispanic while the other participant identified as White or Caucasian. Participants’ chose areas of study included: microbiology, civil engineering, interior design, music education, and one was undecided. Participants’ shared different reasons for choosing to attend this specific institution: the cost of attendance, amount of scholarship money, closeness to family, or another family member attended the same university. Finally, all five of the participants’ expressed a deep commitment to finding academic and personal success and development throughout their college career and stated that was partly the reason they chose to participate in the study. They felt like taking time to talk about their stress and chosen coping styles early on in college could benefit them as they continue to work through their undergraduate program. See table I for participants’ demographic information.

The following descriptions provide a more detailed description of each of the participants’. Pseudonyms, which were selected by the participants’, replaced the participants’ real name in order to protect their identities and maintain their anonymity. The participant descriptions include information about each participant’s self-identified gender, age, and racial/ethnic background. They will also describe their current choice of major and their stress level at the time of the interviews.

Bob. Bob is a long-time resident of the city where the institution is located and found her way to this specific university because it was close to her family and the tuition was affordable. As an 18-year-old first-generation Latinx immigrant, attending college is something that has always been a top priority for her and her family. Bob indicated her overall stress level to be a 6 out of a 10 when signing up to participate in this research study. While Bob is excited to be in college, she is still undecided as to what she wants to dedicate her studies to but describes herself as a committed college student:

Um, I really take my schooling seriously. I like to make that a priority. I really like my studies, like the classes I'm taking and stuff. I'm a little bit of a procrastinator. Sometimes I'm very, like unorganized. But I tend to like, make it up. I always get my work done.

X. As a young 18-year-old Cuban-Mexican from Texas, X certainly did not picture himself attending college in the Midwest. However, out of all the colleges that he applied to, this institution offered the largest amount of scholarships and it was too good to pass up. Moving far away from home was not difficult for X as he was excited to start a new journey but when asked about where he considers home to be at the present moment, he stated the following: "Texas. Take me to Texas [laughs], but yeah, Texas. So, you know, I don't say here would be home. Yeah. I just don't say college is going to be home. Texas will always be home."

X did not share being a long way from home and family as a source of when reporting his stress level of 8 out of 10. X chose to study microbiology in college as a result of a microbiology class he took while in high school. Stating that this form of

science class is not the norm for a high school curriculum, he is grateful that his high school offered it as it led him to find a passion of his. He hopes to do research for the CDC one day.

Renee. Civil engineering is often a field dominated by men, but Renee is not intimidated by this fact. Choosing to study civil engineering was an easy decision for this 18-year-old who identifies as Hispanic. When asked why she chose this particular field, Renee responded by saying: “I’ve always liked building things. And I’m good at math and science. And I like bridges and highways and building. I’d say it’s like the perfect major in my mind, because you’re building things to make the world a better place.”

Renee found her way to this institution from Texas because her older sister also attended the same university and she knew her sister had a positive experience. Renee also stated that she considers herself to be a really good student overall and that she cares greatly about being successful and getting good grades. As an honors student, it is extremely important that Renee earns good grades and maintains a high GPA. She stated she is not concerned about earning good grades and a high GPA as she has always done well in school. In regard to stress, Renee reported that her stress was overall mild and reported her stress level to be a 4 out of 10.

Ana. Ana is an 18-year-old self-identified Hispanic student who is studying Interior Design who reported a stress level of 7 out of 10. Ana considers herself to be a very social college student as she spends most of her time with the same people in her major working on projects together. However, she stated that she does struggle to be social with other people outside of her major as she is just not left with much time to do so. She also reported that one of the most stressful parts of her semester has been

attempting to juggle her time between school work and being social. In regard to her stress level, Ana said that the level of stress often fluctuates throughout the week depending on the day:

Sometimes it hits harder than other times depending on like the project load I have and, depends on what day it is. Usually Thursday's are like my most stressful days because I have, like, majority of my projects due that day with like three classes and just a lot of homework going on.

M. The only 19-year-old participant in this study, M, self-identified as a White, music education major. M said that her parents got her involved in acting and theater at a very young age and this sparked a real passion for this subject field. Once she reached high school, she had participated in over 30 musicals and she realized that she wanted to dedicate her life to teaching other kids about the joy that music education can bring. The current institution was not M's first choice for a college education—but it turned out to be the most practical one:

So, to be quite honest, [current institution] wasn't my first choice. My first choice was [a private institution in the South], but \$40,000 a year. Like that was gonna be all of my four years here. And I was like, I can't do that to my family. Like we're, we were high income and then my dad lost his job. So now we're like, you know, pretty low income. So, it's like they already were struggling to try to like, get me the go to college, they wanted me to and then they saved up and I was like, I can't pull it all in one semester. So, I decided, you know, [current institution] was like, my second choice. There's nothing wrong with it, it just, you know. And I was

like, you know, I'm going to try it here and see how it goes. And then, you know, I submitted my application, all that and I got in and so that was kind of how that happened, was kind of financial stuff, but no, I love it here.

While this institution was not M's first choice, she has loved her experience thus far. M is involved with a few music education related organizations and has been able to continue to perform academically at a college level. However, M also reported her stress level being a 9 out of 10. This is quite high, and she reported this level is due to the increase in homework assignments due for classes as well as balancing classes, extracurricular activities, and working two jobs.

The above descriptions help to give some insight to each of the participants' and how they were feeling at the time of the interviews. The descriptions also provide context for the findings which I will discuss in the next section.

During my in-depth analysis of the data four themes emerged that help understand participants' experience with stress and coping during their first-year in college. Those themes are described with supporting data in this section of the chapter.

Theme I: Academic challenges and expectations. While the experiences of all the participants' were personal and unique, a common experience was the stress related to the transition to college. As the participants' are all traditional age first-year college students, the experience of beginning college was an entirely new experience for each of them. Each of the five participants' spoke to the fact that they experienced a significant amount of stress due to the novelty of life on a college campus. For the participants', college life also presented a new academic structure different from their high school experience that participants' were anxious and stressed about. Participants' shared similar

experiences related to their college academics during their first semester of college. The participants' described how their academic work in college created stress in their lives.

For example, Bob shared:

Um, it's not necessarily like the material it's just you know like, I love my classes, I love the stuff that we learn about. The only thing is like the amount of work and studying and then tests and grades, for sure grades because I don't want to fail or anything. I have a lot of scholarships that I don't want to lose because college is expensive. So, having those responsibilities in the back your head.

For Bob, it was the amount of academic work and the pressure to succeed in their classes that was particularly stress. This pressure to maintain high academic standards was also the case for other participants'.

Four out of the five the participants' were a part of a student success program at the institution and received a scholarship for their participation in the program. The remaining participant was a part of an emerging leaders' program where they also received a scholarship. Due to the stipulations of their scholarships, all the participants' identified their grades as a major source of stress because they were concerned about being able to maintain their GPA at the level required by their scholarships. X discussed the following:

I think the most stressful thing was like, all the mandatory, like, support that was forced upon me. So, first week, I had to meet with my academic advisor to go over calculus because I will inevitably fail calculus and I needed to know how to maintain my GPA for my scholarship.

The sheer intensity of a college workload and how often, and quickly, deadlines can pile up increased participants' levels of stress. Participants' X, Renee, and Ana all identified with the stress that comes from having multiple assignments, tests, and projects due within the same week—and often times on the same day as well. Ana spoke to this stress:

Um, sometimes it hits harder than other times depending on like the project load I have and, depends on what day it is. Usually Thursday's are like my most stressful days because I have, like, majority of my projects due that day with like three classes and just a lot of homework going on.

Beyond the novelty of college academics, the participants' discussed stressful experiences associated with time management and not understanding the ins and outs of being a college student. In regard to time management, the participants' struggled to manage their time with all of their school responsibilities. For example, trying to dedicate sufficient amount of time to studying and completing school work posed a challenge to engaging in social activities. Ana shared:

Um, I think making time to like, hang out with friends is a little stressful just because like, you definitely want to keep up with them. Like, make sure you have time for them but at the same time adding it to your schedule, and making sure that like, you have enough time. Yeah, it's a little bit hard.

Compared to their high school experiences, the participants' described how their ability to manage between their academics and other activities has been different in college. Without the structure of their parents or other adults keeping them on a schedule, it is up to them to create their schedule and make sure that they stick to it. Participants'

shared their struggle with time management was a major source of stress because of the switch in accountability and responsibility roles from high school to college. During his interview, X spoke to the stress he experiences regarding managing his time and new college schedule:

There's so much stuff going on here. But my day usually starts with calculus at 9:30. I used to wake up at 5AM every single day, but I don't know, because now I don't get sleep. I pull an all-nighter about once a week. Really not good. But I need to get all my work done. Back to back is calculus, then micro 120. But the calculus is super hard. And then on Mondays and Wednesdays I spend four hours studying at study stop every single day. And I basically work there, a lot of people think I do work there.

In high school, participants' were often told what to do and when to do it by both their teachers and parents. Participants' responsibility changed dramatically in college because it is up to them to manage their time effectively and be their own accountability system.

The stress that stems from being new to the college life is high because there is such a culture shift between high school and college. The participants' pointed out that not knowing the expectations for homework assignments and being unsure of how to address and talk to their professors were the two biggest factors for stress related to the transition to college. Renee spoke to this experience: "But probably the things that have stressed me out like the most have been encountering, like new things that I don't know how to handle."

Professors can often allow their students to call them by their first name and have a fairly relaxed personality—which is not the case for high school educators. This sharp

contrast in environments posed a challenge for the participants' to adapt to and often invoked stress. Further, instructions for homework assignments and projects in college are often open-ended and require the ability to infer what the expectations are—which is not the norm for high school curriculum. Renee, talked specifically about the stress that she has experienced due to not feeling comfortable with the academic culture or environment in college:

But probably the things that have stressed me out like the most have been encountering, like new things that I don't know how to handle, like having to get up like on, on the first day, or in the second day of like college, having to like leave a recitation because I realized I was in the wrong room, and I was like, maybe I should just stay here. Like one door over. Maybe I should just stay here like, I don't know what to do. Not being sure about like, asking for something or like, not being sure about like, how I should talk to my professor.

The participants' in this study felt these unknown factors created stress for them throughout their first semester because they wanted to be successful but were overall unsure of how exactly to do that. Basically, the transition to a new environment and adjusting to a new academic expectations and time management created stress in participants' lives that they did not necessarily expect. Closely related to this change in environments were maintaining previous and cultivating new relationships. In the next theme, I will talk about the experiences that the participants' had relating to navigating interpersonal relationships how these relationships affected them.

Theme I focused on the experiences that participants' had regarding college academics and the expectations placed on them upon entering college. In Theme II, I will

discuss how the participants' in this study navigated interpersonal relationships in a new environment.

Theme II: Navigating interpersonal relationships in college. College is a time when establishing new interpersonal relationships tends to be a major part of first-year college students experience in college. College students are able to meet new people from all across the world as they settle into life at the institution. While establishing new relationships can be a positive experience, it can also be the source of extreme stress. Participants' in this study described both positive and stressful experiences with new relationships during their first year in college. They all experienced the positivity that new relationships bring to their lives and how it helps them alleviate some of their stress. But they also experienced stress that often accompanies meeting new people and trying to make connections. Renee experienced this stress: "I don't know, talking to people who left their door open on my floor. Like do they want me to leave my door open? But I don't know if they want me to talk to them."

For Renee and Ana, the process of making friends was particularly important because they are out of state students and did not have a strong support group going into college. During her interview, Renee discussed how she was concerned about making friends when she first arrived on campus and the stress she experienced as a result:

So, the only person I knew when I came here was my sister. And I was like, super excited, to make new friends. But like, I kind of come up with like, a plan in my head. I was like, I'll just like make friends with everyone and pick and choose people that like I actually get along with, because I was like, I hadn't had to, like,

make friends like that in like so long ago, and so it definitely stressed me out initially.

In this instance, Renee was able to build a new support group which helped to alleviate some of the stress she felt starting college. However, once these new friendships began to develop, Renee found herself experiencing stress because she was concerned about creating rifts with her new friends. Renee feared if she her opinions, she would divide the new friendships she had made because she felt if her opinions were not consistent with her new friends it could cause divisions. While initially the new friendships were a source of stress relief, Renee quickly found herself developing stress as a result of her new relationships:

Like, if I messed up so bad, like, you know, and it's all these honors kids that like, I probably will see for like the next four years. Yeah, like if I mess up really bad like that's going to be horrible and then like yeah, I guess the biggest things that stressed me out with like other people especially at the beginning of the year was just like, I don't want to, I don't want to mess this up. I was like, even if something goes horribly wrong like I have to see at least the people in my floor for the next like nine months, so just don't be stupid.

Similar to Renee and Ana, M also experienced similar stress due to her interpersonal relationships. M, a music education major, discussed the stress she felt trying to balance different friend groups. More specifically, her stress was due to worrying whether her friends outside of Music Education would understand the amount of time she spends with the friends in her major:

But I'm honestly, I worry about school a lot but, you know, social aspects like I'm always afraid that like my friends who aren't in music or like, she hates me, you know, because my, I'm with my music friends all the time it's just because we're in the same boat all the time.

Theme II discussed the experiences participants' had related to interpersonal relationships in college and the stress that resulted from those relationships. In the next theme, Theme III, I will discuss how participants' interacted with social media and the experiences they had with stress as a result.

Theme III: The influence of social media. A factor related to interpersonal relationships that emerged as a significant source of stress throughout these interviews was the influence that social media had on the lives of participants'. All of the participants' are considered a part of Generation Z and the use of social media has increased greatly in the last few years. All of the participants' except one reported they used social media on a regular basis. X was the only participant who responded that he did not interact at all with social media. When asked if there was a particular reason for this lack of interaction, he stated:

Privacy, like, I value my privacy a lot. Um, plus, I'd never seen the reason for it. And I still really don't see the reason for it. Um, but it's mainly just, I'd rather keep my personal life private. Plus, like the college can see everything that you do on social media, it will come back to bite you. So, I just avoided it from the beginning, and I just never saw the reason for it

The four participants' who did interact with social media often experienced thoughts of comparing themselves to those who they follow on their social media accounts. Renee responded to a question about her interactions with social media stating:

Um, well, since I came to college, I don't use it too much. I only post on Instagram. I don't scroll on Instagram. I hate it. I think it's horrible. I think it's like really bad because when I got here, everyone else's school had started and so like, I moved in like a couple days early and so it was me and I'm not in a sorority. But everyone else on my floor was a girl rushing and so it was just me in the dorms for like two solid days because they were all like out doing stuff and so I was like, I walked around downtown for like hours because I was like, there's no one here.

Renee experienced stress from simply looking at social media and was not the only participant who experienced stress due to looking at social media. Ana discussed how not everything that you see on social media is real and that even though she knows that, she is still fooled by the façade of it:

Um, I feel like social media sometimes adds stress because you just see how other people are doing and like it. Most of the time, people put up a facade on social media saying like, oh, life is great. You don't necessarily know what's actually happening in everyone's life. So, it just sometimes makes you feel like you're not like doing the most that you could do to be successful.

M's experiences with social media were similar. M discussed the stress she experienced due to social media and how she felt about herself saying she would wonder if she was pretty enough or what she could do to become pretty enough, and these feelings created negative self-image and caused her to think poorly of herself. Due to the

stress that she experienced interacting with social media, M said that she no longer interacts with social media like she once did. This was mostly due to the negative self-image she was developing: “So, I still have it, but I just I don't go on it. It used to affect me a lot where I'd be like, oh my gosh, like, oh my gosh, she's prettier than me.”

Participants' also described the stress they experienced due to wanting to be involved in everything they saw on social media. Renee identified this feeling as FOMO, or the fear of missing out. This is when an individual sees others on social media doing things or going places that they would also like to participate in, but they are unable to for one reason or another. The fear of missing out was often connected commonly to making new friends at college. Renee shared a lot about the stress she developed due to seeing people on social media doing fun things back in Texas, and as she moved away for college, she was unable to participate in those activities. Renee also discussed the fakeness that comes along with FOMO stating that while people look like they are having fun and you want to be a part of it, a lot of that happiness seen on social media is fake. She went in depth about this stating:

But like when I see like my friends that go to like University of Texas and I'm like there's no one going to school in the state within two states of me, like I have two states landlocked between me and any of my friends from home, like that definitely, like made me feel bad and added stress to me.

Theme III discussed the influence social media had on the participants'. Many of the participants' discussed that they were negatively impacted by what they viewed on social media and they experienced low self-esteem as a result. The following theme,

Theme IV will discuss how the participants' chose to manage with their stress as they adjusted to a new life at college.

Theme IV: Managing stress as part of the college transition. The participants' were asked how the stress they had experienced thus far in the semester had impacted them. All participants' said that stress had impacted them very negatively throughout their first semester of college. Stress is not an overarching negative experience. Stress is a normal factor of life and no one can escape the experience of it. With that being said, too much stress can become cause incredibly negative effects on individuals. Based on what the participants' discussed, the latter seem to be true for them. Bob described her impact of stress as the following: "Negatively I feel like, a little bit, just because I've never experienced this much stress actually."

The participants' were asked how the stress they had experienced thus far in the semester had impacted them. All of the participants' shared that stress had a major influence on their first semester in college and mostly in a negative way. Bob even she had "never experienced so much stress" in her life up to this point. The stress that these students experienced during their first semester of college always seems to be present. X stated that the stress is a constant and "never goes away".

The stress that these students experienced during their first semester of college always seemed to be present. As the students identified their stressors and discussed how they experience stress, the conversation moved into how they attempt to manage the stress that they experience on a daily basis. Through this conversation, one participant, Bob, quickly answered the following when asked how she manages stress: "Uh, that's a

good question. Sometimes, like since it's my first year I feel like I'm not-It's not managed as much as I should be managing it.”

Participants’ felt overwhelmed which only heightened the stress that they were experiencing. Then, to deal with that stress all of the participants’ stated in one way or another that they often choose to ignore or internalize their stress. While this may seem like the easiest way to deal with stress, it often only leads to more stress in the future as the initial factors of the stress were never resolved. When asked how he would define coping, X said the following:

In terms of stress right now it's internalizing it and just not letting it affect you.

And so far, it's just, I am too busy to be stressed out. So, I just can't let it get to me. If it does, it will just like be a vicious cycle. And I'll get more stressed, more stuff would happen, even more stressed and I just can't let that happen.

While participants’ had many different experiences of stress, they also had developed a number of ways they choose to cope with that stress. Two specific sub-themes emerged during the data analysis process—the participants’ had both physical and emotional ways to cope with the stress that they experienced. Both of these sub-themes will be discussed below.

Physical Coping Methods: Participants’ described a variety of physical coping mechanisms that they utilized in order to deal with the stress they were experiencing. Participants’ identified some healthy coping strategies. Physical activity was a common way participants’ chose to deal with their stress. This was in the form of a full workout or simply leaving the environment that is causing stress and taking a walk. For example, Renee talked about the ritual she had developed of getting up and fully leaving the area

that was creating stress for her and doing some form of physical activity. She stated the following:

I would leave my dorm and like, not just leave like my room like I would like, leave the building and I would get as far as I can and like, do something that I like doing that I think is like, productive or not bad for me. Like I like, I like walking. So, like, it was really cold like two days ago, but I walked to the [downtown area] because I just needed to leave. I walked for like 45 minutes. And it's like, you know, just something to do.

For Renee, leaving her dorm and getting some fresh air was a useful way for her to cope with her stress because she was able to remove herself physically and mentally from the stress-inducing area. Physical activity was a primary way of coping with stress that was described by the participants' to get their mind off of stressful situations. And, they still felt like they were making a healthy personal choice and being productive. For Bob, working out has always been her top choice for coping with her stress as taking time to focus on something other than her stress, such as the workout she was doing, was a great way to relieve stress: "I just hit the gym and it just made me feel a lot better."

Another coping mechanism that was discussed by the participants' was drinking water. When they began to feel stressed out, M and Ana said that taking a second to drink some water and hydrate their body helped them to calm down and relieve some of the stress they had built up. M discussed how her initial reaction to stress is to crawl in bed and turn on Netflix. After a while, she started to incorporate drinking water because it makes her feel better. M stated the following:

But like, the weird thing is like hydration for me like that, for some reason helps me and I don't know why. But like, I'll get my water bottle out now like drink a bunch of water. I probably should get more like, it's a healthy way for me just to be like focusing on something that isn't what's going on. Like if I'm focusing on the fact that oh, maybe I should drink water. Oh, let's drink some water. Let's do this or, you know, do like that, like, for some reason that helps me. And it's an odd little coping mechanism. But like, if I just focused on the fact that I drink a lot of water then maybe you should drink some water and just focus on that. Like, it seems to calm me down so much more.

Participants' used these physical activities to distract themselves from the stress but also to do something physical which made them feel better overall.

While the above-mentioned coping mechanisms are productive ways to deal with stress, the participants' also discussed some unhealthy physical ways in which they typically cope with stress. For M, she found herself developing disordered eating as a way to cope with her stress. Food is often a source of comfort for individuals when they are feeling stressed and it is not uncommon to overeat when trying to deal with stress. In her interview, M discussed her way of coping with stress using food and eating:

Um, I would binge eat a lot. And then there would be just some days where I like wouldn't eat, right, like, you know, like, throw up. And I didn't realize it was unhealthy. I was just like, oh, I'm just eating a bunch because I'm hungry.

After the interview had concluded, I provided M with some information on resources that she could utilize in order to help her with her disordered eating.

When asked about coping mechanisms, Ana mentioned a coping habit she had developed without any thought—pulling out her hair. Ana said the following: “When I get really stressed sometimes, I would like, go through my hair like, and pull out my hair.”

These physical coping strategies were utilized by the participants’ when they were presented with various stressors. Some of these physical strategies were more productive than others—for example, Bob turning to workouts to deal with their stress versus M binge eating and withholding food. Beyond the physical coping mechanisms, the participants’ also discussed their experiences with mental and emotional coping strategies.

Mental and Emotional Coping Methods: The participants’ in this study also identified a variety of mental and emotional coping mechanisms that they use to deal with their stress. To begin, participants’ stated that they would attempt to simply ignore whatever was stressing them out. For instance, X, discussed how when he is presented with stress, he does his best to not let it affect him in anyway:

Um, don't let it get to me. Um, I can feel stress, but I always try to make sure that I don't like feel stress. I know that there are important things to do and I know that I should be stressed but I just have the mindset where it just, it doesn't affect me.

Renee felt inclined to put things off or pretend they are not there in an effort to relieve stress she is feeling. While Renee believes this is an effective way to temporarily relieve stress, she also recognizes this can in turn create more problems later on. She said the following:

Like you, you, you're like, Oh, I can do something else. I could do all my other homework. That's not due for a week and not study for this test. And then the test approaches and then it comes back to the front of your mind.

Renee would put off certain tasks in an effort to relieve stress in the moment but would later realize this was not an effective way to cope. Those tasks that she had put off would start to accumulate and actually create more stress than if she had completed them earlier.

Participants' also discussed that they would choose to mentally isolate themselves from others and would withdraw from social interactions. This form of coping is similar to choosing to ignore the stress as the participants' are withdrawing into themselves and choosing not to face the stress that is presented to them. Ana stated that this way of coping is something she is familiar with and will lean towards if she is especially stressed:

I guess for me, it just depends on like, whether it's like really bad stress or like easier stress, I definitely would talk to other people about it. But if it's like really bad, I just sort of close myself off and like, try to focus on stuff.

Participants' would, at times, withdraw from social interactions in an effort to ignore their stress or at least not create more stress in their lives. On the other hand, participants' also discussed talking with others about the stress in their lives as a coping strategy.

All of the participants' expressed in one way or another that talking through their stress was a common strategy they incorporated to cope with stress. Specifically, for Ana, she liked talking to others about her stress not only as a way to reduce the stress, but to

see how others choose to cope in order to see if she could adopt new coping methods:

“Um, I feel like I would try to talk to other people to see how they deal with their stress and maybe see, like try those out to see if they would help me.”

X described talking through his stress with others as complaining about what was causing stress for him at the moment. When asked to describe this process during the interview, X said:

But it was just, every single time we saw each other, it was just complaining to each other about how much stuff you have to do. Um, so I think like, honestly complaining, it's catharsis, like just complaining about how bad everything is and everyone can relate. For most people, especially my friend, who's always like super busy, it's good catharsis to just like, complain about everything.

Bob noted that listening to music—especially while working out was a great way in which she coped with stress. Besides talking through their stress or listening to their favorite music, taking time to organize a to-do list was also discussed as being a way to relieve stress—especially when the source of stress is not knowing what needs to be done and when it needs to be completed by. Renee discussed that it is not classes that necessarily cause her to experience stress, the stress comes when she is unsure of how or when to do something. Renee spoke about this experience, saying the following:

Usually, I'd say when something stresses me out, it's one of those things where like, I'm not stressed out because of like, classes not going well. I feel like I usually am more stressed out about not knowing how much, like, things I have to do, or what I have to do, or when it's going to have to be done or like, not knowing if I have to do something or how it's going to play out.

Participants' shared a number of different ways they coped with their stress both physically and emotionally/mentally. These coping strategies could be described as both positive and negative depending on the context and degree to which participants' engaged in those activities. As a whole, participants' shared that they often tried to ignore their stress or tried not to let it affect them but realized that was not always the best strategy because it actually created more stress from them later on.

Theme IV discussed how participants' attempted to manage their stress as they adjusted to life in college. Techniques such as talking with friends or family and putting off responsibilities for a while were mentioned by the participants'. In this next section, I will give a summary of this chapter.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the participants' and discussed the thematic findings of my research study. The participants' in this study were traditional age first-year college students. The participants' were majoring in different disciplines and one participant was undeclared. With varying levels of self-identified stress, the participants' had many experiences to share about how stress has played a role throughout their first semester of college. The students that participated in this study had common experiences with stress including dealing with the transition to college. While going to college can be an exciting time, this transition can also be a source of extreme stress because for many first-year college students it is new and unknown. From concerns about how to address professors to making new friends, the participants' discussed how relationships contributed to the stress they felt during their first semester of college. Beyond the transition to college, the participants' also experienced stress as a result of wanting to be

involved in their interpersonal relationships but also recognizing that they felt a lot of stress from these relationships.

When talking about coping strategies, the participants' described multiple ways in which they cope with stress. All of the participants' noted some form of physical and mental way of coping. Physically, the participants' coped with stress by doing some form of physical activity—whether this was a workout, or simply going for a walk. Participants' also described physical coping mechanisms that they were often unaware they were utilizing until much later. Mentally, participants' described talking with others and/or isolating themselves in some situations as coping strategies they employed to deal with stress.

In Chapter 5, I will give a summary of my findings and move into discussion. I will also talk about implications and recommendations for practice as a result of this research study. Further, it will be important to discuss what future research on this subject would look like.

Chapter 5

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

This chapter will connect the research from the literature review in Chapter 2 and the four thematic findings that emerged from the data analysis process of this phenomenological research study. The data for this research study was collected using a semi-structured interview approach that allowed the participants' to share their lived experiences. The participants' were able to describe how they make meaning of their lived experiences with stress and coping through the discussions in their interviews. The interview discussions allowed the participants' to process and delve into the experience of their first semester of college and how their perceptions of stress and coping affected those experiences. This study focused on the perceptions of stress and coping in traditional-age, first-year college students and how they made meaning of their lived experiences.

The importance of this study stems from understanding how prevalent mental health challenges are in college students—but especially for first-year college students as they are just beginning their college career. In fact, Chaló et al. (2017) found that first-year college students have the highest rates of mental health challenges compared to all other college students. The participants' in this study self-identified stress levels between 4-9 out of 10. This is important to point out as first-year college students are considered to have the highest levels of stress (Garett et al. 2017).

In this chapter I will provide a summary of my thematic findings and connect those findings to the research discussed in chapter 2. Further, I will discuss the

implications for practice, as well as recommendations for student affairs professionals and recommendations for future research focused on this subject area.

Overview of Findings

The research questions for this study were aimed at understanding traditional-age, first-year college students' experiences with stress and coping. The questions for this study were designed to understand participant's perceptions of stress and coping mechanisms they utilized to cope with stress. The questions for this research study were as follows:

1. What do current traditional first-year college students perceive as stressors during their first year of college?
 - a. How do they experience stress?
2. What do traditional first-year college students identify as coping mechanisms?

As the principal researcher for this study, I specifically chose to focus on this population of college students (i.e., traditional-age first-year college students) because I had professional experience working with this population prior to the study and I witnessed the stress that these students experienced. I had experience teaching a first-year experience seminar course where I worked with a number of first-year college students and was able to build strong rapport with many of them and hear about their stress as they attempted to adjust to life on a college campus. It was through this experience that I realized how important it was to learn and understand the experiences that this population of college students have in relation to stress and coping. The main area for recruitment was within a student success program at the research site.

For each interview, I utilized a semi-structured approach in order to allow the participant to guide the direction of the conversation, while still providing a foundation for a conversation to start. As this research study aimed to create an understanding of each participant's lived experiences, it was important to allow them the freedom to direct and tailor the conversation to each of their specific life experiences with stress and coping. The semi-structured approach also allowed the participants' a safe space to express themselves and talk about their experiences throughout their first semester of college. Many of the participants' expressed how helpful it was to have someone to talk to about their stress and how they had been feeling regarding their college experiences thus far.

As described in Chapter 4, the findings of this study included the following themes: *Academic Challenges and Expectations*, *Navigating Interpersonal Relationships in College*, *The Influence of Social Media*, and *Managing Stress as a Part of the College Transition*. Analyzing the data was challenging as many of the themes were closely related and it was difficult to separate them from one another. The participants' discussed the experiences they had throughout their first semester of college related to the challenges they faced. For participants', differences between academic expectations in high school versus college created stress because participants' were unprepared and did not know how to deal with these different expectations. Further, the participants' discussed how their stress was less related to the level of difficulty in their courses. Instead, their stress stemmed from not knowing how to manage their academic experiences (e.g., not having clear instructions on assignments, how to talk to professors, how to correctly study for exams). When it came to interpersonal relationships, the

participants' in this study had a variety of experiences. Participants' struggled with learning how to maintain current relationships and how to navigate new relationships in college. For example, some participants' experienced stress as they attempted to balance the different relationships, they had with various friend groups who were different from one another. It was also stressful for the participants' to try and make time for their friends while also keeping up with their academics and their personal well-being.

Social media also had an influence on the participants' and their personal stress levels. For some participants', interacting with social media created an immense amount of stress and often resulted in negative personal feelings. One of the participants' even pointed out that while she knows much of what is portrayed on social media is a façade and people only show the highlights of their lives, she still is affected by what she views and experiences significant stress as a result. While some of the participants' experienced stress related to the use of social media, one participant did not utilize any social media platforms because he prefers to keep his life private. Further, discussed that once something is posted on social media, it cannot be erased, and future employers can see what has been posted on your social media accounts. Finally, the participants' discussed their experiences with managing their stress and the coping strategies they enacted to deal with their stress. Physical activity of some form was a common response from the participants'. This included doing an actual workout or just simply going outside to take a walk and give themselves a break from their stress. Communicating their feelings and talking through their stress was another common strategy that the participants' utilized and found beneficial to deal with their stress. On the other hand, there were also some more unhealthy forms of coping utilized by the participants': choosing to isolate oneself,

ignoring stressful situations, pulling out hair, and disordered eating. Participants' struggled to find a healthy way of coping when their stress was severe. In this next section, I will discuss a summary of the themes in more detail.

Summary of Themes and Discussion of Past Research

The participants' experiences were generally consistent with the literature surrounding first-year college students and their experiences as they began college. Further, all participants' had experiences with stress and coping that were directly related to the literature on academic challenges and expectations, interpersonal relationships, and social media. This research study focused on traditional age first-year college students. As these students are currently between the ages of 17-19, they are considered a part of Generation Z—individuals who were born between the year 1997 and the present year ("Defining generations", 2019). The participants' in this study had consistent experiences with research related to social media in Generation Z individuals. Further, the participants' had experiences that were directly related to research surrounding interpersonal relationships. The findings of this study showed that the participants' often struggled to balance their academics and their many different interpersonal relationships, much like the research conducted by Raftu (2017) showed. Throughout this next section, I will discuss each thematic finding from this research study and the connections to past research.

Theme I: Academic challenges and expectations. Valadas et al. (2016) found that the first year of college is extremely critical in the retention and overall success for a college student and their future college career. Further research conducted by Denovan and Macaskill (2012) found that students who are progressing toward a college degree

often attributed this lack of degree progress to problems they dealt with during their first year of college. The shift of academic environment and expectations between high school and college causes stress for first-year college students because they are required to learn new requirements and expectations (Quan et al. 2014). This is an experience that participants' in this study discussed in their interviews. The stress that the participants' were experiencing was not necessarily from the difficulty of courses, but it stemmed more from the unknown of what was expected of them and how to manage those expectations (e.g., communicate with professors, instructions for course work).

The participants' in this study also discussed the stress they experienced from trying to maintain their GPA for scholarship requirements. This exacerbates stress levels for first-year college students because not only are they trying to adjust to new academic expectations, these students are also feeling pressure to be academically successful because their financial security depends on it. As Garrett et al. (2017) found, academic performance is one of the largest predictors of stress that first-year college students will experience. Scholarships open the door for a lot of students to attend college who may not be able to without financial support, so it is not uncommon for students to experience stress as a result. Scholarships typically have GPA requirements but first-year college students are often still adjusting to the new academic environment in college so their grades may not be as high as they were in high school which causes stress. The participants' in this study discussed how their grades were not reflective of their high school academics and they were concerned about maintaining their GPA in order to keep their scholarships. Finally, the participants' discussed the stress that they experienced due to the amount of assignments that would pile up very quickly and they would struggle to

best manage their time. As first-year college students enter college, they have become accustomed to doing the bulk of their homework during the school day and only being responsible for a small portion outside of school. In college, this is often switched and it can be quite shocking and stress inducing for students (Denovan and Macaskill, 2012). All of the participants' in this study experienced stress due to the amount of homework they now had outside of class. Participants' in this study struggled to balance all of their academic demands along with socializing (Quan et al. 2014) In the next thematic finding, I will further discuss how participants' in this study navigated interpersonal relationships in college.

Theme II: Navigating interpersonal relationships in college. Interpersonal relationships play a significant role in the college experience and the transition into college can add stress to dealing with relationships when starting college (Coccia & Darling, 2014). Participants' in this study discussed the challenges they faced regarding their different relationships throughout their first semester of college. As students are leaving their social support networks and moving to college, they are forced to create new support networks and find a new community. It is important for first-year college students to find support on campus as this helps support a more successful adjustment to college (Coccia & Darling, 2014). The findings of this study are consistent with this related research as the participants' discussed how important it was to them to make new friends and build a new support system as they started college (Coccia & Darling, 2014). The participants' moved away from their families and friends and often did not know anyone on campus as soon as they arrived. Due to that, they experienced stress as they attempted to meet new people and create new friends. Research by Quan et al. (2014)

found that the more social support a student has in college, the better adjustment they will have throughout their first-year of college.

Theme III: The influence of social media. Social media use has increased over the last few years—especially in this new generation of students, Generation Z. In fact, college students have integrated the use of social media into their everyday lives and place high value on social media (Deatherage et al. 2013). Students in today’s society have more direct access to social media than past generations, and that increased access has also increased the level of stress that college students experience (Deatherage et al. 2013). This increased level of stress based on social media use was also the case for most of the participants’ in this study who used social media every day. However, there was one participant who did not have any social media accounts. This participant discussed they did not have any social media accounts to protect their privacy. This participant also stated that anything someone posts online can always be found again and could be damaging to a reputation for future employers. Other participants’ noted experiencing negative self-image after looking at social media because of the façade that people often put up of themselves. Various posts of people always having fun and looking their best is what caused these negative feelings the most. One participant went as far as to say that she no longer looks at social media because of how negatively affected she was by it. Another participant stated that even though she knows that much of what she says on social media is not the whole story, it still negatively affects her. The findings of this theme were consistent with past research regarding the influence of social media on first-year college students (Deatherage et al. 2013).

Theme IV: Managing stress as part of the college transition. The final theme pertains to the coping strategies of the participants'. Due to this, their decision-making skills are often impaired as a result of the underdevelopment of the frontal lobe of their brain. One of the ways in which participants' in this study discussed how they cope is by isolating themselves or choosing to ignore their stress. For first-year college students, they often think that choosing to ignore their stress for a while will help resolve the issue and many of the participants' stated this is their experience (Liu et al. 2017). One of the biggest issue with this is that students at this age (18-19) are often unaware of the issues that can stem from choosing to ignore their stressors. While students think they are coping with their stress in a positive way, they may not understand that ignoring their stress is not a productive way to deal with stress (Liu et al. 2017).

Locke et al (2016) noted that various forms of self-harm were common within first-year college students in terms of coping with stress. Participants' in this study identified two forms of physically harmful coping strategies that they each used to deal with stress. One participant discussed that they would pull out their hair when they were stressed and the other participant stated that she would binge eat, develop feelings of regret and withhold food following the binge episode. Participants' also talked about doing some form of physical activity as a way to cope with stress. For example, going to the gym to do a workout or simply taking time to go outside and take a walk. Finally, the most common coping strategy for the participants' was talking through their stress with their family and friends. Shukla and Joshi (2017) found that social support can be a great coping method when it comes to stress. Participants' said that even if their friends or family could not necessarily help them solve their issues, having someone to talk to about

their stressors was incredibly beneficial. Human connection and having support is important for positive coping because loneliness can lead students to develop a negative vision of their environment and ultimately lead to negative ways of coping (Quan et al. 2014). Having a strong support system has a positive influence on the coping strategies utilized by first-year college students as they seek out those support networks to talk through their stress (Diniz et al. 2016). It is important to note that all of the above coping mechanisms could be viewed as both positive or negative. For example, while the use of physical activity is often thought of as a positive coping mechanism, if an individual exercises too often that it becomes an obsession or interferes with their other responsibilities, this could be viewed as a negative way of coping.

Finally, while not the primary focus of my study it is likely that participants' identities influenced their experiences with stress and coping. For example, all of the participants' but one identified as female and the focus on relationships could at some level be related to how gender influences how participants' make meaning of relationships. The participants' cultural background, being first-generation, race, and ethnicity may have influenced their experiences in college and the ways in which their participation in the student success program may have mediated this cultural mismatch. Having access to a student success seminar that is focused on building community and offering support to students could have aided in the participants' transition to college.

All of the themes were related to each other in one way or another and help to understand the experiences of the first-year college students who participated in the study. The findings also provide insights into the experience with stress and coping for first-year college students during their first semester in college. I will discuss the

implications for student affairs practice, recommendations for practice and my recommendations for future research in the remainder of this chapter.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Through the participant interviews, I was able to hear the different experiences students had throughout their first semester of college and gain a better understanding of their perceptions of stress and coping and how they made meaning of those experiences. Based on the findings of this research study, the following implications for practice are offered that could be beneficial for educators and professionals working in higher education and student affairs:

- While it can be easy to assume that college students should be able to be responsible and accountable for themselves, the findings indicate that first-year college students need guidance and support as they begin the transition into college. First-year college students are new to the college life experience and student affairs professionals, faculty and others should be aware that these students need more resources at the beginning of their college career as they attempt to settle into a new lifestyle. Due to this, student affairs professionals and faculty at institutions of higher education should proactively provide information to incoming first-year college students regarding how to navigate their campuses. This should include information on potential sources of stress and how to effectively deal with the increased stress in their lives (e.g., mental health concerns).
- The findings of this study showed that first-year college students may struggle with the change in academic environment and the expectations that are placed on

them. As a result of that, professionals in the field should provide incoming first-year college students with workshops or information regarding what will be expected of them in the classroom setting. These workshops should include how to contact and speak with faculty and staff members, how to use on-campus testing centers, and other information and resources to help ease that transition.

- Student affairs professionals should be given access to attending conferences that offer information related to the development of first-year college students in order to develop skills on how to best work with this population of students. Through these conferences, student affairs professionals would be able to gain skills on how to work with first-year college students and how to best support them throughout their transition to college. Institutional support to attend these types of conferences and workshops is important to provide student affairs educators with the information and tools to help facilitate first-year student success academically and socially.
- There are various professional organizations that exist to help strengthen the working knowledge of student affairs professionals. The two most common are ACPA—American College Personnel Association and NASPA—National Association of Student Personnel Administrators which both have core competencies that help to broaden the knowledge of student affairs administrators and educators (ACPA/NASPA, 2010). These core competencies cover a wide array of skills that professionals should develop in order to best serve their students. Institutions should provide their employees with access to these

organizations and competencies to allow their employees to be able to better support their students.

- Some of the participants' in this study identified physically and mentally unhealthy ways of coping. Those included: isolating oneself, pulling out hair, and disordered eating (bingeing and withholding food). Institutions need to provide their faculty and staff with information on how to best support first-year college students who may utilize one or more self-destructive and maladaptive coping strategies. While students who struggle with these coping methods should be referred to a professional who is trained in a specific area, faculty and staff should have basic training on how to have difficult conversations and where, when, and how to direct students to additional support. These conversations could be focused on the importance of mental health, coping mechanisms, or how to seek professional help.
- One of the findings of this research study focused on how participants' experienced stress due to not knowing what is expected of them or some of the hidden curriculum within college. For example, not knowing how to speak to or email with faculty staff members or not knowing what professors expect of their students on their assignments. These experiences caused a lot of stress for participants' in this research study and is something that should be addressed by student affairs professionals. Faculty and staff members working in higher education should be aware of these stressors and be proactive in discussion expectations with college students.

Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals

Based on the findings of this research study and the implications for practice, I offer the following recommendations that are more specifically for student affairs professionals and educators:

- Provide incoming first-year college students with adequate information regarding counseling services and other wellness centers that are available for students. This information would include any on-campus resources as well as any community partners that the institution has that helps students with their mental health. Providing these resources should begin at orientation activities before students begin their first semester in college.
- Provide workshops to first-year college students that teach them healthy ways to cope with their stress and ways to practice self-care.
- Student Affairs professionals and faculty members need to be aware and knowledgeable about the severity of mental health challenges in all college students, but particularly in first-year college students and how they can best support the students. This information could be transmitted through training sessions, conferences, or workshops for professionals.
- Student Affairs professionals should work to combat the stigma that surrounds mental health challenges in order to break down barriers between themselves and first-year college students. This includes student affairs professionals being aware of their own stress levels and willing to seek support when they are feeling overly stressed or unable to manage their stress in effective ways.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study examined the perceptions of stress and coping in traditional-age, first-year college students. While there were no specific parameters for participant demographics, only one male participant volunteered for this study. In future research, it would be important to recruit more male participants' in order to gain a better understanding of their experiences related to stress and coping. Further, while four of the participants' self-identified as Latinx individuals, it would be important for future research to focus on broadening the racial and ethnic diversity in order to gain an understanding of how an intersection of identities affects the stress and coping experiences of first-year college students. Additionally, all of the participants' in this study identified as cis-gender. Future research should also focus on students who identify as non-binary or transgender as those students' experiences could be vastly different from those students who identify as cis-gender.

The findings of this study stemmed from the experiences that the participants' had throughout their first semester of college. While the findings portray a picture of the lived experiences of the participants', I believe further research should attempt to follow the participants' throughout their first full year in college and conduct more than two interviews. This longitudinal design would allow the participants' to have more experiences regarding stress and coping and could help to strengthen this area of research.

Future research should attempt to reach more diverse populations of first-year college students. The experiences of international students would vary greatly from the experience of domestic students for a myriad of reasons. A large difference could

potentially be language barriers as well as a shift in culture from the student's native home and their college campus. Another population to consider is students who are parents and other non-traditional college students. As a traditional age student (17-19), attempting to balance starting college while also having a child would add a lot of different experiences related to stress and coping that the participants' of this study could not speak about.

Finally, research related to the differences between first-year college students who actively use social media and those who do not would help to better understand the influence of social media on college students' lives. Social media platforms and accessibility change frequently and how students use social media should continue to be investigated along with its positive and negative impact on students' transitions to college.

Conclusion

This qualitative phenomenological research study was conducted in order to create a better understanding of the lived experiences of traditional age first-year college students. The participants' in this study experienced much stress throughout their first semester of college and as a result, struggled to find healthy and productive coping mechanisms. Four themes emerged throughout the data analysis process which were: *Academic Challenges and Expectations, Navigating Interpersonal Relationships in College, The Influence of Social Media, and Managing Stress through College*. Sub-themes were identified and provided an even deeper explanation of the lived experiences of the participants'. In this chapter, I connected the findings of this study with past research, made recommendations for both student affairs and other higher education

professionals and identified areas for future research on this subject. Throughout this research project, I learned how important it is for traditional-age first-year college students to receive support as they begin their transition to college. Further, I hope that student affairs professionals understand the role they can play within these student's transition to college. Offering more information to students on what their expectations are will help to ease a large portion of the stress that first-year students experience. The results of this research study are important to institutions of higher education because they show how prevalent mental health challenges are within traditional-age first-year college students and it can lead to negative coping behaviors. Hopefully, with the results of this research study, more support surrounding mental health on college campuses will emerge.

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Appendix A

Canvas Announcement for Participant Recruitment

Hello,

My name is Bridgett Grant and I am a 2nd year master student in the Educational Administration program. I am conducting a research study on 1st year student's perceptions of stress and what they identify as coping mechanisms. This study will consist of two 45-60-minute interviews that will be conducted during December 2019. In order to participate in this study, you need to be a traditional-aged (17-19) and a 1st year student. If you are interested in participating in this study, please see the attached flyer and follow the Qualtrics link to sign up and then follow the Calendly link to schedule your 1st interview

Qualtrics link: https://unleducation.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_7OHVTaUxcd6zcl

Calendly link: <https://calendly.com/firstyearstudentsignup/stress-in-first-year-traditional-students>

If you have any questions, please contact me at:

bgrant23@huskers.unl.edu

Thank you for the consideration,

Bridgett Grant

Appendix B

Electronic Informed Consent Form

Stress and Coping on College Campuses

Start of Block: Default Block

Title of Research:
Stress and Coping on College Campuses

Authorized Study Personnel:
Principal Investigator: Bridgett Grant
bgrant23@huskers.unl.edu

Secondary Investigator: Corey Rumann
Crumann2@unl.edu

IRB Project ID:

Purpose I. Key Information:

The research involves two (2) 45- 60-minute interviews in addition all participants' will be asked to complete a Qualtrics survey and consent form which will take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. Note: Participants' must be 17-19 years of age, in their first year of college, and not have attended any other college or university to participate in this study. There is no direct benefit for participating. There is no monetary compensation or equivalent for participating.

Q41 II. Invitation

You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please email the primary investigator at bgrant23@huskers.unl.edu

Q43 III. Why are you being asked to be in this research study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you are a traditional aged (17-19) first year college student at UNL.

Q42 IV. What is the reason this research is being conducted?

This study is being done to understand students in their first year of college and stress, as well as their personal view on coping mechanisms. Further, this study aims to see if what current first year students experience as stressors differ from common stressors already researched and identified.

Q44 V. What will be done during this research study?

You will be asked to complete two (2) 45-60-minute interviews, via in person meetings with the principal investigator scheduled in November 2019 and December 2019. The questions are open-ended, designed to elicit your reflections on your perceptions of stress and coping mechanisms.

Q45 VI. What are the possible risks of being in this research study?

Participants' may be asked to speak about situations or feelings that are upsetting to them. This study focuses on stress and the effect on the participant's daily lives, therefore, there may be subjects that the participant does not wish to speak about or may be uncomfortable sharing. The researcher will provide information regarding counseling services available to the participants'.

Q46 VII. What are the possible benefits to you?

You are not expected to get any direct benefit from being in this study.

Q47 VIII. What are the possible benefits to other people?

This study provides an inside look into the current generation of first-year college students' feelings and experiences with stress in their daily lives. The information

collected in this study will be useful for understanding the experiences with stress that this new generation is facing. Further, this study will collect information on what the participants' perceive as coping mechanisms.

Q48 IX. What will being in this research study cost you?
There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

Q49 X. Will you be compensated for being in this research study?
There is no compensation offered for participating.

Q50 XI. What should you do if you have a problem during this research study?
Your welfare is of great importance to the principal investigator. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you can contact me at any time. Also, you have the right to withdraw from this study at any point.

Q51 XII. How will information about you be protected?
Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. The data will be stored electronically through a secure server, known as Box, and will only be seen by the principal investigator during the study. Once the data collection and analysis is completed, all identifying information (including your institutional affiliation[s]) will be removed from the data and/or destroyed. Un-identified data will be encrypted and stored in secure electronic format for 4 years after the study is complete. The information from this study may be published in academic journals or presented at academic or professional meetings; but the data will be reported as group or summarized data, and your identity will be kept strictly confidential. This study will involve the collection of private information (name, dates, etc.). Your information could be used or distributed to another researcher for future research studies without an additional informed consent from you. Identifiers (name, dates, etc.) will be removed prior to being distributed.

Q52 XIII. What are your rights as a research subject?

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. For study related questions, please contact the investigator listed at the beginning of this form.

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research, contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

- Phone: 1 (402) 472-6965
- Email: irb@unl.edu

Q54 XIV. What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study (“withdraw”) at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the primary investigator or with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

Q55 Would you like to participate in this research study? Select one and click the next button.

- YES: If you would like to participate and are ready to sign up, please complete the consent form on the next page. (1)
- MAYBE: If you are potentially interested in this study, but would like additional information before proceeding, please provide your contact information on the next page (or contact directly the researcher listed above or in the invitation message you received) and the principal investigator will contact you. (2)
- NO, but I know someone who might be interested, or I have a question or comment for you. (3)

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Q35 Furthermore, you acknowledge that the interview will be audio recorded, and that after the interview data have been analyzed, the audio recording will be encrypted and later destroyed after the end of the study. Select yes or no.

- Yes, I acknowledge the interview will be recorded. (1)
- No, I do not acknowledge that the interview will be recorded (2)

Q56 I'M NOT INTERESTED

Thank you for taking the time to consider this research study invitation. If you change your mind or have questions, don't hesitate to complete this form again or contact the principal investigator.

If you know someone who might be interested in participating, or have any other questions or comments for the principal investigator, please follow-up directly at bgrant23@huskers.unl.edu.

Skip To: End of Survey If I'M NOT INTERESTED. Thank you for taking the time to consider this research study invitation. If... Is Displayed

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Q36 **MAYBE**: If you are potentially interested in this study, but would like additional information before proceeding, please contact the researcher in the invitation message you received or complete the following information and the principal investigator will contact you.

Your name (1) _____

Best contact method (phone and/or email) (2)

Any preliminary questions or information you'd like to share (3)

Q38 Thank you for registering your interest in this research study.

The principal investigator will reach out to you soon to address your questions and provide further information.

If you decide you'd like to participate in the study, you can return to this Qualtrics form and register your consent.

Skip To: End of Survey If Thank you for registering your interest in this research study. The principal investigator will r...() Is Displayed

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.....
First Name

.....
Last Name

.....
Gender

.....
Age (Must be between 17-19 years of age)

.....
Ethnicity

.....
Email Address

.....
Phone Number

.....

Chosen Pseudonym

End of Block: Default Block

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

- I. Welcome the participant and thank them for taking time to participate in the study.
- II. Explain the purpose of the study:
 - To investigate how current traditional first-year college students perceive and experience stress, what they perceive their coping mechanisms to be, as well as how they interact with social media.
- III. Explain why they were selected for this study based on the following criteria:
 - Enrolled in at least 12 credits at the University of Nebraska Lincoln
 - Currently a traditional first-year student (Between the ages of 17-19)
 - Have not attended a college or university prior to enrolling at UNL
- IV. Describe the interview process:
 - Researcher will conduct a brief review of the consent form and clarify any questions or concerns of the participant
 - Researcher will conduct the interview
 - Wrap-up the interview allowing the participant to ask any questions they may have.
- V. Interview process:
 - Informed Consent Process
 - a. Personal identity will be kept confidential in all ways to ensure the participants' cannot be identified.

1. i.e., the participants' name will not be used during the interview or throughout the research paper and no identifying information (family names, class schedule, etc.) will be utilized.
- b. Researcher will be the only person with access to the data.
- c. Participant has the ability at any time withdraw from the study (choose not to participate) and will not be penalized.
- d. Also, participants' can decline to answer a question if they are not comfortable or feel distressed.
- e. Explain that there is minimal risk involved in participating in this study; however, one could experience emotional distress in the process of discussing personal experiences.
- f. Signing the informed consent document indicates that participant understands the purpose of the study, their role, and how their information will be used.
- g. Ensure participants' retain copy of the informed consent form.

VI. Notes on Recording

- Researcher will be the only person with access to the audio recordings and transcriptions.
- Audio recordings will be deleted at the end of the study.
- Researcher will not use your full name in the interview transcripts.
- Researcher will never share information that would allow participants' to be identified.

- Remind participants' to speak loudly and clearly for recording.
- Inform participants' that the recording device will be turned on.

VII. Individual Interview

- Intro Script: "Before we begin, I would like you to choose another way to be referred to besides your given name to ensure protection of your identity in recordings."
- Clarification: "Do you have any questions before we start? Is there anything I can clarify for you?"

VIII. Wrap up

- Thank the participant once again for their time.
- Remind them that their identity will remain private and that identifying information will be kept confidential.
- Provide researcher's contact information in case they have questions or concerns.
- Ensure the participant they will be provided access to the research project.

IX. Interview Questions

- Interview #1
 - a. Could you tell me how you decided to attend UNL? What was that process like?
 - b. How would you describe yourself as a college student?
 - c. What is a typical day like for you?
 1. Follow up question about managing stress from working and being a full-time if needed.

- d. Can you tell me about how stress has impacted you so far this semester, if at all? What has that been like for you?
- e. Can you describe what invokes stress in you?
 - 1. Follow up question about non-academic stress if necessary.
- f. Can you describe how stress has changed in your life since starting college?
- g. Can you describe how social media adds stress to your life, if at all?
- h. Is there anything else you would like to add before we end the interview? Do you have any questions for me?

· Interview #2

- a. Do you have any feedback from the first interview or anything you would like to discuss before we begin?
 - 1. Ask any clarifying questions from 1st interview if needed
- b. Could you tell me about how you have coped with stress in the past—either effectively or ineffectively? Or, how do you typically cope with stress in your life? Do you have an example?
- c. Can you describe a particularly stressful situation you have dealt with that has been a result of college?
- d. What is coping to you?
- e. Can you describe what a healthy coping mechanism looks like that you practice for stress?

- f. Can you describe what an unhealthy coping mechanism looks like that you practice for stress?
 - g. If the coping mechanisms you normally utilize do not help you in a situation, what would you do?
 - h. How has the way you coped changed since you started college?
 - i. Is there anything else you would like to add before we end the interview? Do you have any questions for me?
- .
- .