First-Year College Students' Homesickness and Separation Anxiety: Implications for Orientation, Retention, and Social Integration

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Severe homesickness in college students is considered by many mental health clinicians to be a manifestation of adult separation anxiety disorder (ASAD). Recent research suggests that while approximately 7% of adults have ASAD, as many as 21% of college students may suffer from the disorder. In this article, we examine the psychological characteristics of ASAD and review the literature relating ASAD to student retention. Surprisingly, relatively little research has examined ASAD as a risk factor for college student retention, especially given its frequent occurrence. In this literature review, we also discuss current university practices and orientation programs that would help retain students with ASAD, along with recommendations for future research.

The transition to university life is revered by many as an exciting, positive adventure filled with endless possibilities, but one that can also be overwhelming for some individuals. For many students, transitioning into the first year of college involves significant change to their established life routines (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). With this change comes the necessity to effectively acclimate to a new environment and adapt to new social and intellectual challenges (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995; Fisher & Hood, 1987). A significant number of students are able to adjust successfully to their new environment; however, many students, especially those experiencing separation anxiety and/or homesickness, struggle to make a successful adjustment. In fact, recent research indicates that as many as 21% of college students may experience significant symptoms of separation anxiety while at college (Seligman & Wuyek, 2007).

Separation anxiety can occur when one experiences developmentally inappropriate and excessive anxiety concerning a separation from home or from an attachment figure such as a parent or guardian (Seligman & Wuyek, 2007). Severe homesickness has been considered by many mental health experts to be a manifestation of separation anxiety. Flett, Endler, and Besser (2009) defined homesickness as "the distress or impairment caused by actual or anticipated separation from home" (p. 265). These phenomena can hinder a student's ability

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to make a successful transition to college and, given its prevalence, should be addressed by orientation and student affairs professionals.

A major challenge in helping students suffering from acute separation anxiety and homesickness is that many often suffer in silence and are therefore difficult to identify. Since homesickness is a commonly accepted occurrence for students transitioning into college, students suffering from extreme and persistent feelings of homesickness often feel ashamed to admit they are not capable of overcoming their fears and anxiety as quickly as their peers. Many students experiencing separation anxiety have encountered symptoms as children and have not developed effective strategies for coping with a separation from parents or a transition into a new environment. Research has also revealed that students suffering from homesickness which causes transitional stress are more likely to be living far from home (Tognoli, 2003; Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011), are from ethnically diverse backgrounds while enrolled at predominantly White institutions (Guiffrida, 2009; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010), and lack the additional psychological and social support that they need to transition successfully (Flett et al., 2009). Based on these findings, it is important that orientation and student affairs professionals play a proactive role in seeking out and identifying this population in order to provide the support services necessary for these students to have a positive and successful adjustment to college life.

Identifying and Understanding Students at Risk for Separation Anxiety Disorder

In order to effectively identify students suffering from separation anxiety and homesickness, prevailing symptoms need to be described so appropriate prevention and intervention strategies can be specified. Although the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR)* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), specifies that the onset of symptoms of separation anxiety disorder (SAD) occurs before the age of 18, recent research supports the notion that SAD does exist in adult form (Seligman & Wuyek, 2007; Manicavasagar, Silove, Marnane, & Wagner, 2009). Shear, Jin, Ruscio, Walters, and Kessler (2006) found that, "…contrary to suggestions in the DSM-IV-TR, the estimated lifetime prevalence of adult separation anxiety disorder (6.6%) was higher than the estimated lifetime prevalence of childhood separation anxiety disorder" (p. 1,078). In fact, Shear et al. (2006) suggested that the majority of respondents in their study classified as "adult-onset" cases began their illnesses in their late teens and early 20s. Seligman and Wuyek (2007) found that 21% of their sample of 190 first-year college students reported experiencing significant symptoms of separation anxiety. These findings indicate that adult separation anxiety disorder (ASAD) could be a valid diagnosis for first-year college students. First-year college students suffering from ASAD may experience recurrent excessive distress, nightmares regarding separation, reluctance or refusal to go to school, and physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, nausea, or vomiting when

separation from home or major attachment figures occurs (Ollendick, Lease, & Cooper, 1993). *DSM-IV-TR* also notes that SAD can cause significant distress or impairment in social and academic functioning (Seligman & Wuyek, 2007). These symptoms are important to keep in mind when developing effective intervention strategies for college students experiencing ASAD.

Homesick students may also report feelings of stress, anxiety, depression, obsessionality, loss of memory, and low perceived controllability (Fisher & Hood, 1987). Prolonged feelings of homesickness can lead to absent-mindedness, a lack of concentration and performance ability, and cognitive failures (Urani, Miller, Johnson, & Petzel, 2003).

Social anxiety is also prevalent in students who experience homesickness. Urani et al. (2003) found that students with high levels of social anxiety were slower to establish social support networks in college which directly influenced the persistence of their homesickness. The American Psychiatric Association has defined social anxiety as "marked and persistent fear of one or more social or performance situations in which the person is exposed to unfamiliar people or to possible scrutiny by others" (1994, p. 416). Young adults experiencing social anxiety find it difficult to adjust socially in situations where they are unfamiliar with the people and/or their surroundings (Urani et al., 2003). Though the symptoms associated with ASAD and homesickness may be experienced by many students, those experiencing severe and persistent symptoms during their first year of college would benefit from preventative efforts as well as therapeutic and counseling interventions.

Theoretical Considerations for Retention and Social Integration

In examining theoretical models of the persistence and withdrawal process in higher education, Tinto's Interactionalist Theory (1993) provides a valuable framework that can help explain what types of services are needed to help retain students suffering from separation anxiety and homesickness. Tinto's theory purports that a student's formal and informal interactions with the college significantly influence his/her departure decisions. According to Tinto, students enter college with certain background traits such as individual attributes, academic aptitudes, social skills, and varying levels of commitment to the institution and to the goal of graduation. Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) found that departure decisions were directly influenced by students' background traits and their level of integration into the social and academic systems of the college.

Social integration is a key component of Tinto's theory and should be considered when addressing the needs of students experiencing ASAD or homesickness because these two conditions are associated with one's ability, or a lack of ability, to adjust to a new social environment (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) supported this notion and also suggested that emotional and social adjustment predicts the likelihood of withdrawal as well as, or better than, academic adjustment.

Komives and Woodard (2003) stated that "Social integration refers to the

extent of congruency between the individual student and the social system of a college or university" (p. 327). Extracurricular activities, informal peer group associations, and both formal and informal interactions with faculty and staff serve as mechanisms of social integration. Moreover, orientation staff members are often key "socializing agents" for first-year students because of their early interaction with new students. If a student does not possess the skills necessary to become socially integrated into the university, and if the institution does not create and promote policies and programs that foster social integration, the risk of student departure is increased (Tinto, 2006; Komives & Woodard, 2003). Positive social networks are also a very important component of college adjustment and a student's perception of insufficient social support has been shown to predict attrition (Tinto, 2006; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) concluded, "Some of the most commonly reported crises in the freshman year involve difficulties in social adjustment manifested as feelings of homesickness and loneliness" (p. 281).

A student's interpersonal and intrapersonal development also influences his/her social integration into a university. Students possessing well-developed intrapersonal skills are better prepared to manage the demands for independent functioning required during the college transition such as the need to effectively navigate a new social environment (Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004). A key developmental process that students experiencing ASAD or homesickness struggle with is separation-individuation, described as "the absence of negative feelings about the process of separation, including feelings of anxiety, guilt, or expecting rejection when separating" (p. 213). Ideally, the separation-individuation process begins when a student separates from his or her parents and other significant figures and later involves individuation and maturation into a rational, autonomous self.

Researchers have suggested that a balance of a healthy level of separation-individuation and a secure attachment relationship to parents is a strong predictor of a positive academic, social, and personal-emotional adjustment to college (Mattanah et al., 2004; Kazantis & Flett, 1998; Berman & Sperling, 1991). In fact, Pizzolato and Hicklen (2011) suggested that this is an especially challenging adjustment for students from the Millennial Generation. When faced with highly emotional situations, Millennials are more likely than past generations to rely heavily on the advice and guidance of their parents. This generation of students also tends to seek consultation from their parents during the decision making process to help them evaluate the implications of their options. Through open communication and active involvement in the decision making process during times of major transition and change, parents of Millennial college students can facilitate a healthy separation-individuation process.

Another important component of separation-individuation that many students begin to experience during their transition to college involves identity development. Many students entering college begin to question their self-worth, direction in life, and the nature of their relationships. Students prone to homesickness typically have an especially difficult time navigating through their individual thoughts and beliefs because many of these students possess low levels

of self-esteem, poor ego identity, and limited internal locus of control (Tognoli, 2003). Self-reflection and self-discovery can be a very traumatic experience for students, especially if they do not have an established social network which can provide guidance and support during this process (Keup, 2008; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994).

Interpersonal development also influences a student's ability to become socially integrated into the university. Students who are better prepared to socially interact with faculty, staff, and their peers are more likely to return to college after their first year (Pan, Shuqin, Alikonis, & Bai, 2008). The presence of quality student-teacher relationships, a counselor-student relationship, and secure peer attachments can provide much needed emotional support for students experiencing homesickness (Mattanah et al., 2004). As stated by Tognoli (2003), successful student adjustment is closely related to "an appreciation for newly made friends, making the dorm room feel more homelike, maintaining e-mail and phone contact with parents and friends, and viewing the experience as a process" (p. 35). Students experiencing homesickness and separation anxiety during their first year of college typically lack the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills necessary to become socially integrated into college life.

Implications for Orientation and Student Affairs Practitioners

Though many programs and services currently exist to aid students in their transition to college, most are geared toward meeting the needs of a typical first-year college student. Many universities have orientation programs that introduce students to the social and academic characteristics of the institution and attempt to bring students together to build relationships, but unfortunately, many of these programs appear to fall short in addressing the needs of students experiencing persistent and intense symptoms of separation anxiety and homesickness. A September 25, 2011, query to NODA listserv members asking if they offered special programming or outreach services to severely homesick students garnered only one response in the affirmative, and that program included only an hour-long workshop on coping with homesickness as part of their normal programming.

Students who are socially anxious are often fearful of and intimidated by the quick paced, hyper-intensive model of week-long orientation programs. Perhaps there is a need to examine orientation activities that serve students who enter school with severe homesickness and poor social skills. Unfortunately, a current traditional model of orientation program is typically designed to last for a week or less which does not help "at-risk" students during their first year of college.

One solution to assist students who experience persistent struggles with social adjustment could be to offer a year-long orientation program. Bergman, McClelland, and DeMont (1999) described the characteristics of multiple Canadian university programs geared toward first-year transition to college. One school described in their study offered a freshman seminar class called University 100 which informed students of the resources available to them. Their research noted that 80% of the students who took University 100 went on to complete their

degree. Freshman orientation programs at some Canadian universities include a week of workshops and seminars regarding study habits, time management, financial and career planning, a mentorship program, and even orientations for parents (Bergman et al., 1999). These types of programs would be beneficial for students suffering from separation anxiety and homesickness because they encourage social development through peer mentorship and foster social integration by promoting student involvement and educating students on how to effectively navigate the university system (Kelly, Kendrick, Newgent, & Lucas, 2007).

Freshman orientation programs and seminar classes similar to the Canadian models are prominent in the United States as well, and they are imperative to help students transition into their first year of college. A missing component in many of these programs is that social and emotional developmental needs of students with ASAD and homesickness are not addressed. Pritchard, Wilson, and Yamnitz (2007) maintained that many students made the decision to stay or leave within the first six weeks of college, and those who did decide to leave typically cited emotional reasons for dropping out of college. Based on this evidence, offering orientation programs that focus on teaching students appropriate coping strategies to overcome the psychological stresses involved in the college transition may increase student retention. One program might be counseling centers hosting required seminars for at-risk students during orientation week (Pritchard et al., 2007).

Orientation facilitators could be trained to identify symptoms of ASAD or homesickness in order to refer homesick students to seminars that will provide them the support they need to make a successful transition. For example, Manicavasagar, Silove, Curtis, & Wagner (2000) created the Adult Separation Anxiety Checklist (ASA-CL), a psychometrically robust, 27-item self-report measure useful for identifying individuals at risk for ASAD. The ASA-CL could be included as part of initial orientation and advising materials, and using such a screening instrument could facilitate more valid referrals to counseling staff.

University housing programs have also made efforts to provide opportunities for social development. Learning communities in residence halls attempt to foster a positive and productive university experience by encouraging student interaction with faculty and residence hall staff, enhancing academic development, and providing opportunities for development of self-confidence, self-worth, and interpersonal competence (Dillon, 2003; Schroeder & Mable, 1994). Parent programs have also been created to inform parents of how they can best assist their students in transitioning to college. Programs which include parents typically promote active involvement in helping their sons or daughters adjust to college life. The emotional support that parents are encouraged to provide by maintaining appropriate levels of interaction can help those students experiencing separation anxiety feel more comfortable about separating and adjusting to college (Mattanah et al., 2004). Given that ASAD has been found to be more prevalent in adults whose symptoms appeared for the first time when they were children (Silove, Marnane, Wagner, Manicavasagar, & Rees, 2010), parent programs may also provide an opportunity for parents to learn about separation anxiety and determine whether or not their students are at risk.

Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, and Alisat (2004) evaluated the effectiveness of Wilfrid Laurie University's Transition to University (T2U) program in assisting students with adjustment to college life. The four main stressors recognized in their study were academic, social, personal, and university environment. The T2U program was designed on the premise that if students perceived resources as sufficient to manage these stressors, they would manage stress more effectively and adjust well to college. Groups of 10 students met weekly throughout the school year to discuss the emotional and social challenges they faced. The researchers concluded that T2U helped students develop realistic expectations about college life, helped them develop strategies to cope with the difficulties that the college transition presented, normalized their concerns, provided them with information about the resources available on campus, and promoted a sense of belonging and support. The T2U program appeared to foster social and academic integration and could be utilized to address the individual needs of students experiencing separation anxiety or homesickness throughout the school year. Perhaps first-year seminar classes similar to the T2U model would benefit students more if they were offered in every academic department and would be more attractive if they were built into academic curriculum requirements with students receiving credit for completing the course.

Programs and services designed to address the emotional and psychological needs of students appear to be lacking among colleges and universities in the United States (Pritchard et al., 2007). Research has demonstrated that students drop out of college due to a combination of academic, social, and emotional factors (Keup, 2008; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). Pan et al. (2008) described one (unnamed) university's attempt to provide multiple resources for potential at-risk students. The programs created by this urban, Midwestern university were based on Tinto's Student Integration Model. They were also based on Astin's Theory of Involvement which supports the notion that "involvement with faculty and student peer groups encourages participation in social and intellectual life of a college, and, therefore, helps learning and persistence in college" (Pan et al., 2008, p. 90). The university's comprehensive system included advising programs, academic help programs, social integration programs, general orientation programs, and first-year experience programs including required courses designed to help with transition. Providing multiple intervention strategies to help students become socially and academically integrated increased the university's retention of first-year students.

In addition to implementing aspects of the above mentioned programs and services, assessing the psychological needs of first-year college students experiencing separation anxiety and/or homesickness and using appropriate intervention strategies to assist them in their emotional transition are essential to increasing their likelihood of retention. Coll and Stewart (2002) supported this notion and stated that counseling services should take into consideration a student's unique predispositions and provide individualized programming which focuses on student development and growth. An intervention program that proved to be successful in fostering this growth involved collaboration between counseling services and an academic program.

At the beginning of the academic year, students were provided with an overview of counseling services and a description of the therapeutic relationship. Throughout the semester, students who exhibited poor classroom attendance or unsatisfactory academic performance were given the option of enrolling in three counseling sessions or writing a research paper to make up the points. Students were also encouraged to seek out counseling voluntarily if desired. Coll and Stewart (2002) described an intriguing outcome of this program:

> students who received counseling made significant gains in their confidence in university choice…reported significant increases in the number of times per month they had contact with faculty to obtain basic information about academic programs, to discuss a campus issue or problem, and to receive help in resolving a personal problem. (p. 139)

The counseling services provided through this program contributed to student success. Though this particular program was a small scale collaboration between counseling services and an academic program, it may serve as a model for similar programs for first-year college students having difficulty adjusting to college life.

As stated earlier, the transition to college life can be an intimidating and traumatic experience for students with separation anxiety and homesickness. It is our responsibility as student affairs professionals to identify and provide this population with appropriate support to enable them to become socially and academically integrated into the university. While some universities offer multiple programs and services geared toward assisting the average student in his/her transition, there has yet to be a comprehensive approach developed that will specifically meet the social and psychological needs of this challenging and growing segment of students. A university may best meet the needs of such students by providing a combination of freshman orientation programs that teach students effective coping strategies and social skills, university housing programs that foster community development, year-long seminar classes that provide peer and faculty support throughout the year, and an active collaboration between counseling services and academic departments to foster interventions for at-risk students.

Future research should further investigate the prevalence of ASAD in college students and the role it plays in retention and social integration. Researchers would also be well advised to examine ethnic, gender, and social class differences in ASAD that could be impacting the academic and social integration of these individuals. Finally, future investigations could explore effective interventions and orientation programs that would help retain this vulnerable and growing population.

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