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Predictors of Stress Among Accounting Students

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PREDICTORS OF STRESS AMONG ACCOUNTING STUDENTS

ABSTRACT

In assessments of wellbeing, accounting students report experiencing significant amounts of stress. Bjornsen et al (2024) describe a wellbeing program integrated into the curriculum of a small accounting program of a university in the American Midwest. The authors note several areas of concern based on student responses to the wellbeing assessment portion of the program. In particular, accounting students noted that they experience a lot of stress. We extended the Bjornsen et al assessment by including demographic data to determine whether the areas of concern varied by student groups. Identifying the student groups most at risk would allow us to target students most in need. In this study we focused on stress. We regress stress against gender, transfer status, distance from home, and status as an international student. We also include several control variables based on literature dealing with college student stress. Findings indicate that stress reported by our students is related to gender (female students experience more), status as an international student (international students experience less) and on several control variables.

INTRODUCTION

The accounting industry is experiencing a shortage of accountants today due to baby boomer retirement and continuing significant turnover in the industry. Conditions are only expected to be more challenging in the future due to low numbers of accounting program enrollments and graduates. In this environment it is critical that accounting programs find ways to increase enrollments and retain students (Reisig 2023). Job stress and turnover have been shown to be significant contributors to turnover in the profession (Chong and Monroe 2015). If accounting students are feeling significant stress, it is not unreasonable to expect such stress to contribute to them leaving accounting programs.

As a faculty concerned about the stress experienced by our students, it would be easier to address such stress if we could identify the students. The purpose of this study is to determine if stress varies by easily identifiable groups of students. Various independent

variables representing different groups of students are used to explain the varying levels of reported stress.

Results indicate that reported levels of stress do vary by student group. In particular females students report experiencing stress at much higher levels.

HYOTHESES

In our accounting programs we have easily recognizable student groups. There is reason to believe that stress levels will vary across those groups.

Gender

Research indicates that women experience higher chronic stress and more daily stressors than do men (Motud 2004). Much of the heightened stress experience by women, however, can be attributed to life events. Undergraduate women are less likely to have many of those stress inducing life events, e.g. childbearing, and thus, the stress levels college age women and men may not have the same disparity. Thus, while we expect higher levels of stress to be reported by women than by men in general, we are not as confident that the differences will be manifest in students in our program.

H₁: Female students will report higher level of stress than male students.

Transfer Status

Transfer students often enter the program after one or two years at another institution.

Often the prior institution is a community college in the student's community that allows the student to attend college while living at home. Transfer students come to campus and

enter a program where friendships have already been formed. We expect transfer students to experience higher levels of stress than students that began their studies at our university.

H₂: Transfer students will report higher levels of stress than non-transfer students.

Distance from Home

The distance between a student's home and college has been found to be negatively related to social integration and positively to homesickness (i.e., Brooks & DuBois, 1995; Fisher, Murray, & Frazer, 1985; Tognoli, 2003; Mattern, Wyatt, and Shaw 2013).

H₃: The greater the distance between the university and the student's home, the greater level of stress that will be reported by the student.

International Students

Adaptation to college is a source of stress for most college students. Add to that the stress of adapting to a new culture and learning in the non-native language, and it is not surprising that international students will experience higher levels of stress (Alharbi and Smith 2018).

H₄: International students will report experiencing higher levels of stress.

Year in School

On the one hand, college freshmen experience the stresses of adapting to college life. On the other hand, college seniors experience the stresses of post-graduation plans (Beiter et al 2014). In the middle years are the stresses of academic performance and the need to keep pace for four years. Thus, we believe that stress levels will vary by year in school.

While each year brings its own stressors, we predict that stress levels will decline as students acclimate and get closer to the end of the program.

H₂: The higher the class level the lower the level of stress that will be reported by students.

Control Variables

Qualitative studies on the stresses faced by college students indicate several causes. In a review of qualitative studies, Hurst et al (19??) note the most frequently reported stressor experienced by college students, i.e., relationships including those with family, romantic partners, peers, and faculty; lack of resources including time, money, support, and skills; expectations including self and others'; academics; environment; and other including career extracurricular activities and health. Much of the information gathered in our wellbeing assessment align well with these reported stressors. We include items from our wellbeing data that align with these stressor as control variables to measure the effects of these contributors or mitigators of stress.

THE MODEL

The regression model to be estimated is as follows:

$$STRESS = \beta_0 + \beta_1 GENDER + \beta_2 TRANSFER + \beta_3 DISTANCE + \beta_4 INTERNATIONAL + \beta_5 YEAR + \beta_{6-n} CONTROLS_{i-n}$$

Because the large number of variables in the complete model, we use a backwards elimination procedure to get the best fit for the model. Because we question whether our dependent variable is ordinal interval in nature we use both OLS and the PLUM ordinal

regression estimation models until we make up our minds. Variables are described in Table 1.

Table 1
Measurement of the Variables

<i>Name</i>	<i>Description/Definition</i>
<i>Independent Variables</i>	
STRESS	From our wellbeing assessment: I have too much stress in my life.
GENDER	Female = 1, Male = 0.
TRANSFER	Student transferred after attending another college = 1, 0 otherwise.
DISTANCE	Home is less than 20 miles from the university = 1, Home is more than 20 miles but less than 100 = 2. Home is more than 100 miles away but less than 200 = 3. Home is more than 200 miles away but less than 400 = 4. Home is more than 400 miles away = 5.
INTERNATIONAL	International student = 1, 0 otherwise.
YEAR	Freshman = 1, Sophomore = 2, Junior = 3, Senior = 4, Postgrad = 5.
<i>Control Variables (all from our wellbeing survey)</i>	
LWID	I like what I do.
RESOURCES	I have the resources I need to do good work.
RESPECT	I am treated with respect every day.
GOALS	In the last year, I have reached most of my goals.
COUNTON	If I were in trouble, I have friends and family I can count on.
RELIGION	Religion is an important part of my daily life.
LOVE	I have a lot of love in my life.
RELATIONSHIPS	The relationships in my life are strong.
ROMANCE	My relationship with my spouse or partner is stronger than ever.
POSITIVE	Relationships in my life give me positive energy every day.

GROUP	I have a group where I belong and am accepted.
S&L	I often feel sad and lonely.
FOOD\$	There were times in the last year when I did not have enough money to buy food for me or my family.
CARE	There were times in the last year when I did not have enough money to pay for healthcare for me or my family.
FINISH\$	I am confident that I will have resources needed to finish my education.
FUTURE\$	I will have enough money in the future.
HEALTHPROBS	I have health problems that prevent me from doing things other students can do.
SLEEP	I get a healthy amount of sleep most nights.
APPEARANCE	I always feel good about my physical appearance.
PAIN	I experience pain most days
EXERCISE	I exercise regularly because I am health conscious.
DIET	I have a very healthy diet.
ENERGY	I have had a lot of energy every day this last week.
WALKING	I feel safe walking alone at night in my community.
WALLET	If a neighbor found my wallet or purse containing item of value to me, I think it would be returned with its contents.
PLACE	The place where I live is perfect for me.
S&S	I always feel safe and secure.

The Data

Bjornsen et al (2024) describe a program of developing and assessing wellbeing in the accounting curriculum. The Bjorsen et al assessment uses a 50-question survey based on the Gallup Press Wellbeing book (Rath and Harter 2010). Students are asked, “How well

does this statement describe you?” They respond on a five point scale from 1, not at all, to 5, very well.

We use the Bjornsen et al assessment instrument with added questions to gather information on our five variables of interest. The assessment was performed in Intermediate Accounting and Auditing in 2022 and 2023. We have 89 responses.

Control variables included several of the assessment questions that proxied well for stressors reported in the literature and noted above.

RESULTS

Table 2 contains the linear regression estimates. Table 3 contains the ordinal regression estimates. Note from Table 2 that of our 5 hypothesized variables, only have an effect on reported levels of stress. Female students experience significantly more stress than male students. International students experience significantly less than American students.

Table 3 reports similar results for our hypothesized variables. There is a difference, however, in the control variables that are significant in the models.

Table 2

Linear Regression Results

$$STRESS = \beta_0 + \beta_1 GENDER + \beta_2 TRANSFER + \beta_3 DISTANCE + \beta_4 INTERNATIONAL + \beta_5 YEAR + \beta_{6-n} CONTROLS_{i-n}$$

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Predicted sign</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>t-statistic</i>	<i>Probability</i>
Constant		5.839	8.415	.000
<i>Independent Variables</i>				
GENDER	+	.0631	3.258	.002
TRANSFER	+			
DISTANCE	+			
INTERNATIONAL	+	-2.122	-5.010	.000
YEAR	-			
<i>Control Variables</i>				
RESOURCES		0.334	2.987	.004
LWID		-0.400	-2.831	.006
GOALS		-0.119	-2.189	.032
RELIGION		-0.136	-2.369	.020
POSITIVE		-0.270	-2.616	.011
WALKING		-0.273	-3.143	.002
S&S		0.194	1.722	.089
R ²	.484			
F statistic	2.510			
Probability	.001			

Table 3

Ordinal Regression Results

$$STRESS = \beta_0 + \beta_1 GENDER + \beta_2 TRANSFER + \beta_3 DISTANCE + \beta_4 INTERNATIONAL + \beta_5 YEAR + \beta_{6-n} CONTROLS_{i-n}$$

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Predicted sign</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>Probability</i>
GENDER	+	1.974	14.876	.000
TRANSFER	+			
DISTANCE	+			
INTERNATIONAL	+	-6.310	16.571	.000
YEAR	-			
LWID		-0.938	6.149	.013
RESOURCES		0.777	6.836	.009
GOALS		-0.449	3.551	.059
RELIGION		-0.200	1.877	.171
LOVE		-0.553	3.395	.065
PAIN		-0.262	1.569	.210
EXERCISE		-0.483	7.366	.007
Pseudo R ²	.453			
Chi-Square	53.739			
Probability	.000			

WHAT IS NEEDED TO COMPLETE THE STUDY

What is reported in this paper is very preliminary, but we thought it would be good to discuss at the conference. Here are things we have left to do.

1. We need to report more descriptive data.
2. Some of our variables need to be converted to dummies.
3. We need to decide if the data is interval or ordinal and use only one model.

4. We need to spend more time thinking about the control variables and how that information can be used.
5. We need to flesh out why female students report more stress so we can act on it. Looking at simple correlations we see that female students report exercising less, feeling less safe in their communities, having more time when they are sad and lonely, and being more goal oriented.
6. We need to do the reference list but ran out of time.

Conclusions

There is no statistically significant difference between stress reported by transfer students and others, by students that are far from home versus those who are not, and by students in year of college vs. another. Female students report higher levels of stress than do male students. International students experience less. Less stress reported by international students in our university in contrary to what has been reported in the literature. It may be that the international student services office at our university has found a way to reduce stress among that group of students.

