



Understanding Changes in Emotional Health for First-Year Residential Students

The Student Affairs Information and Research Office (SAIRO) is the research and assessment office within UCLA’s Student Affairs organization. The mission of SAIRO is to support the learning and development of the whole student by providing reliable, timely and useful information about students and their experiences; by developing the capacity of Student Affairs and other stakeholders to collect, interpret, and utilize data to enhance the quality of students’ educational experience and environment; and by helping Student Affairs units assess and document the effectiveness of their programs and practices.

**For more information or to submit a data request, please contact the Student Affairs Information and Research Office (SAIRO) at:
 (310) 206-8470 or sairo@saonet.ucla.edu.
 Visit us online—www.sairo.ucla.edu**

Contents

Executive Summary	1
Data Sources	2
Sample	2
Research Methods	2
Findings	3
Conclusion	5

Executive Summary

This report describes the results of a study seeking to understand changes in emotional health for residential students in their first year of college. Further, this study investigated how emotional health is related to campus engagement and the utilization of resources, net of student demographics and incoming emotional health.

Key findings include:

- Students’ emotional health generally declined during the first year in college.
- While the difference between emotional health for men and women was significant at the beginning of college, the difference narrowed and became insignificant after the first year.
- Students’ self-rating of their emotional health before college remained the strongest predictor of their emotional health in college.
- Underrepresented minority students were more likely to have lower emotional health.
- Students who agreed that living on campus has helped them feel a part of UCLA also reported higher levels of emotional health.
- Students who agreed that living on campus has helped them better manage their stress also reported higher levels of emotional health.
- Students who spent more hours socializing with friends were more likely to have higher levels of emotional health.
- Students who more frequently attended academic programs had higher levels of emotional health after the first year.
- Students who attended wellness programs also tended to have lower emotional health.

The results suggest that the college and residential living experience can influence emotional adjustment to college. Implications for first year programming and access to resources are explored.

Data Sources

This report draws from two data sources: the 2011 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey and the Office of Residential Life's 2012 "Rate the Hill" Survey (ORL Survey). The CIRP Freshman Survey is a national survey sponsored by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) and is completed by over 400,000 entering students at approximately 700 higher education institutions. The survey addresses topics such as parents' background, intended major and degree aspirations, racial background, reported income and financial aid, activities within the last year (academic, personal, and social), and attitudes. UCLA participates in the survey biannually during freshman summer orientation collecting valuable information about the incoming class of students. The ORL Survey is an online survey about experiences with residential life administered to all students living in on-campus housing and is generally administered in the spring. The survey captures adjustment, engagement, use of resources, and satisfaction with living on campus. Relevant to this report, both surveys asked students to self-report their emotional health compared to the average person their age.

Sample

The sample in this study was comprised of 1331 first-year students living in on-campus housing who responded to both the CIRP and ORL survey. The students were 38% White, and 60% Female (see Table 1 for more sample information). First year students make up approximately 35% of the total on-campus housing population. Our sample represents 37% of the first-year students living on-campus.

Table 1. Population and Sample

	Sample		First Year On-Campus Housing Population	
	N	%	N	%
Men	517	39.0	1515	43.0
Women	807	61.0	2024	57.0
White	508	38.2	1300	37.0
Asian	579	43.5	1485	42.0
URM	171	13.0	516	15.0
Total	1331	100.0	3553	100.0

Research Methods

Crosstabs and t-tests were examined to determine if there were significant differences between incoming emotional health and emotional health after the first year across gender and race. The variables selected for the regression analysis were divided into inputs and environments according to Astin's I-E-O Model and Astin and Dey's CAMBRA Method ("Causal Analytical Modeling with Blocked Regression Analysis"; Astin, 1993, Astin & Dey, 1996). The CAMBRA method also guided the temporal order by which variables were entered into the equation using forward entry. By utilizing this method of analysis, the 33 independent variables were entered in six blocks.

The dependent variable, emotional health after the first year, was selected as it is a crucial component and indicator of adjustment to college. While pre-college emotional health is likely a strong predictor of emotional health in college, the college environment poses new challenges and a change in lifestyle which can lead to changes in reported emotional health (Renn & Reason, 2013).

Involvement in college extracurricular activities has been shown to have a positive impact students' emotional health. Understanding what kinds of engagement and campus resources improve emotional health for first year students is important for campus administrators who wish to further support the transition to college and provide services that respond to changes in students' emotional health.

The input variables were entered first in three different blocks. The first block was student's self-rated emotional health upon entry to college. The second block included demographic variables such as race and sex. The third block included institutional variables such as the distance of college from the student's home, and concern about financing their college education. The environment variables made up the fourth, fifth, and sixth blocks. The fourth block captured how often students reported feeling depressed and overwhelmed by all they had to do after their first year in college. Because feeling depressed and overwhelmed would likely contribute to how students rate their overall health, it was important to control for responses to these items. The fifth block included items that captured different kinds of engagement on campus such as hours spent studying, working, and socializing. The sixth block included

items around campus resources such as knowledge of resources for dealing with personal problems. Campus resource variables also included how students perceived living in residential housing helped with things like managing stress, promoting sense of belonging, resolving conflicts, etc. (See Appendix A)

Findings

Descriptive Results

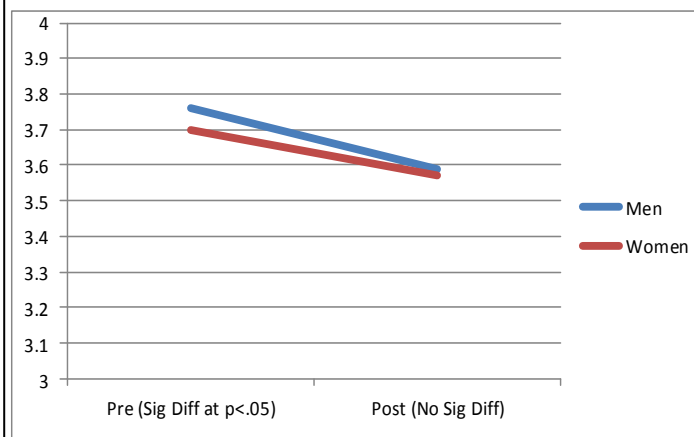
Overall, students' self-rating of their emotional health generally declined over the course of their first year in college (pre-college emotional health \bar{x} =3.76, first-year emotional health \bar{x} =3.59) (See Table 2). While men entered college with significantly higher self-ratings of emotional health than women, both men's and women's rating of their emotional health decreased over the first year (See Figure 1). Additionally, over the first year, men reported a greater decrease in their emotional health. The end result was that men and women's self-ratings of emotional health reached near parity toward the end of the year and held no significant difference. These results support prior research on emotional health, specifically that emotional health declines for both genders after coming to college and women tend to rate their emotional health lower than men. However, considering these findings, one wonders what experiences are potentially different by gender that might moderate the steepness of men's decline and the gradual nature of women's decline.

Table 2. Mean Differences in Emotional Health by Gender and Race

	n	Before college	After first year
Total	1121	3.75	3.61***
Men	404	3.83	3.66**
Women	711	3.69	3.58**
White	450	3.77	3.67*
Asian	516	3.70	3.59*
URM	159	3.70	3.4***

$p < .05 = *$, $p < .01 = **$, $p < .001 = ***$

Figure 1. Mean Differences by Gender



Regression Results

Of the 33 independent variables, 9 entered the final model explaining 39 percent of the variance in emotional health during the first year of college (see Appendix B). Incoming emotional health was the strongest predictor of emotional health after the first year in college ($\beta = .30$). The next strongest predictors were feeling depressed and overwhelmed by the end of the first year ($\beta = -.30$ and $-.13$ respectively). This indicates how much all students emotionally adjust to college; while incoming emotional health predicted smaller declines in emotional health, even students with higher levels of incoming emotional health were susceptible to developing feelings of distress through the transition to college.

Out of all of the incoming demographic and institutional environment characteristics entered into the regression, being an underrepresented minority (URM) student on campus was the only significant predictor of emotional health ($\beta = -.08$). URM students included Black/African American, Mexican American/Chicano, and Native American students. This means that URM students were more likely than other students to have lower emotional health after coming to college. Neither White students nor Asian students had changes in emotional health that differed from the average. While this study could not control for all student background characteristics, programs targeting first year students should consider how URM students might experience additional challenges emotionally adjusting to college.

The focus of this study was the potential for campus engagement and the utilization of resources to predict changes in emotional health over the first year. While a

number of questions asked students which resources they utilized and in which activities they participated, only a few entered the final model as significant. Students who agreed that living on campus helped them feel a part of UCLA also reported higher levels of emotional health ($\beta = .10$). Additionally, students who agreed that living on campus helped them better manage their stress also reported higher levels of emotional health ($\beta = .04$). While all students in the sample lived on campus, those who reported higher levels of emotional health seemed to have found resources and support in the residence halls that improved their sense of belonging and levels of stress, likely leading to better emotional health. What remains uncertain about this finding is how some students are learning about or utilizing the support and resources provided and what differentiates them from students who have not. Perhaps they were not made aware of resources and support, or they chose not to engage with the resources offered. Additionally, there may have been other factors contributing to the students' ability to engage with the residential resources that we were unable to capture and were therefore not controlled for in this study.

Students who spent more hours socializing with friends also had higher levels of emotional health after the first year ($\beta = .06$). This finding aligns with what we already know about college students and how social groups can help improve the adjustment to college. Research also suggests that living on campus helps students connect with other students

and build strong friendships and relationships. Again, because all of the students in the sample were living on campus, it is evident that those who found friends - perhaps through living in the residence halls - benefited by also having higher emotional health. The challenge is that we do not know why some students did not spend as much time socializing with friends despite having the same opportunities to interact with others in the residence halls. While we did control for some potential explanations such as major, or distance from home, those variables did not enter in the final model.

Students who attended more academic programs were more likely to have higher levels of emotional health after the first year ($\beta = .08$). In line with adjustment literature, both academic and social adjustment contribute to students feeling positive in their new community. While attendance at most programming in the residence halls is optional, this finding supports the continued offering of academic support programs; as students learned to navigate the academic experience with fellow classmates, faculty, and staff, the benefits of these programs also had a small but mediating effect on their emotional health.

Even though attending academic programs, socializing and living on campus seemed to matter for students, Students who attended wellness programs actually saw greater declines in their emotional health after the first year ($\beta = -.07$). This means that students who attended more programs related to wellness tended to report lower emotional health by the end of the first year. One possible interpretation of this result is that students who

Table 3: Regression Results (Final Model)		
	R square Change	β
Incoming emotional health	0.192	.30***
Underrepresented racial minority	0.11	-.08**
Felt depressed	0.132	-.30***
Felt overwhelmed by all you had to do	0.017	-.13***
Felt living on campus helped manage stress	0.02	.09**
Felt living on campus helped feel a part of UCLA	0.015	.11**
Attendance at academic programs	0.004	.08*
Attendance at wellness programs	0.005	-.07*
Hours spent socializing with friends	0.003	.06*
Final R Square	0.39	

were having difficulty adjusting to college were attending more wellness programs to help with the adjustment and the programs either had no impact on their emotional health or prevented their emotional health from being even worse than had they not attended the program. It is unlikely that attending more wellness programs actually made students feel worse, however they may have been more aware of their emotional health or ways of conceptualizing emotional health and were therefore also changing their perspective on what it meant to rate their emotional health. The data also did not allow for analysis of how attending wellness programs changed emotional health before and after specific programs.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that while all students' emotional health generally declines in the first year, there are a number of factors that may influence that change. Even though the difference in men and women's emotional health at the end of the year is similar, men reported greater decreases in emotional health. In addition, URM students were more vulnerable to declines in emotional health over the first year.

Students who reported that living in the residence halls helped them manage their stress and feel a part of UCLA, also reported higher levels of emotional health. Socializing on campus and attending academic programs were also related to better emotional health. While attending wellness programs predicted lower emotional health after the first year, it remains unclear the extent to which these programs prevented even lower emotional health or in what ways these programs may have influenced how wellness and emotional health is perceived and rated.

There are a number of factors that influence how students' emotional health changes after coming to college. Because emotional health is not only a factor but also a product of the adjustment to college, understanding how the college environment can influence emotional outcomes is an important priority for university administrators and staff. Future studies and conversations should consider what goals exist around emotional health. Because self-ratings of emotional health typically decline over the first year, is it realistic to strive for emotional

health to remain stable? Is the goal to eliminate differences in ratings of emotional health across race and gender? Nonetheless, working to understand what experiences and resources support emotional health is a step in the right direction.

Appendix A. Regression Variables by Block (N=719)

Variable Name	Mean	SD	Scale
Block 1			
Pre-test: self rating of emotional health	3.76	0.85	1="Lowest 10%"; 2="Below average"; 3="Average"; 4="Above average"; 5="Highest 10%"
Block 2			
Sex: Male or Female	1.63	0.48	Male = 1, Female = 2
White/Caucasian	1.43	0.50	Marked=1, Not-marked=2
Asian American/Asian	1.45	0.50	Marked=1, Not-marked=2
Underrepresented Racial Minority (Includes Black, Mexican American/Chicano, and Native American)	1.15	0.36	Marked=1/Not-marked=2
What was your average grade in high school?	7.49	0.67	1="D"-8="A or A+"
Citizenship status	2.88	0.43	1="Neither", 2="Permanent Resident (green card)", 3="U.S. citizen"
What is your best estimate of your parents income?	9.15	3.47	1="Less than \$10,000"-14="\$250,000 or more"
Block 3			
How many miles is this college from your permanent home?	4.26	1.14	1="5 or less," 2="6 to 10", 3="11 to 50", 4="51-100", 5="101 to 500", 6="Over 500"
Do you have any concern about your ability to finance your college education?	1.91	0.57	1=None, 2=Some, 3=Major
Block 4			
During this academic year how often have you felt overwhelmed by all you had to do?	2.29	0.60	1="Never"-3="Frequently"
During this academic year, how often have you felt depressed?	1.75	0.66	1="Never"-3="Frequently"
Block 5			
Living on campus how often did you have discussions with other students that helped you gain new life perspectives?	2.29	0.61	1="Never"-3="Frequently"
Living on campus how often do you stay around campus over the weekend?	2.67	0.55	1="Never"-3="Frequently"
This academic year approximately how many wellness programs have you attended?	1.64	1.00	1="None"-5="Four or more"
This academic year approximately how many recreational programs have you attended?	2.20	1.33	1="None"-5="Four or more"
This academic year approximately how many spirituality/faith focused programs have you attended?	1.62	1.17	1="None"-5="Four or more"

Variable Name	Mean	SD	Scale
Block 5 (continued)			
This academic year how many academic support programs have you attended?	1.98	1.08	1="None"-5="Four or more"
This academic year approximately how many social programs have you attended?	3.33	1.38	1="None"-5="Four or more"
It has been difficult for me to get to know the neighbors in my residential community	2.80	1.11	1="Strongly disagree"-5="Strongly agree"
Living on campus has helped me become more aware of opportunities to engage in community service work	3.43	0.97	1="Strongly disagree"-5="Strongly agree"
During the current academic year how many hours do you spend during a typical week studying?	5.44	1.07	1="None"-8="Over 20 hours"
During the current academic year how many hours do you spend during a typical week working?	2.12	1.94	1="None"-8="Over 20 hours"
During the current academic year how many hours do you spend during a typical week doing volunteer work?	2.11	1.44	1="None"-8="Over 20 hours"
During the current academic year how many hours do you spend during a typical week exercising sports?	3.75	1.51	1="None"-8="Over 20 hours"
During the current academic year how many hours do you spend during a typical week In student clubs/groups?	3.32	1.66	1="None"-8="Over 20 hours"
During the current academic year how many hours do you spend during a typical week socializing with friends?	5.25	1.52	1="None"-8="Over 20 hours"
Block 6			
Living on campus has helped me feel a part of UCLA	4.06	0.84	1="Strongly disagree"-5="Strongly agree"
Living on campus has helped me better manage stress	3.29	0.91	1="Strongly disagree"-5="Strongly agree"
Living on campus has helped me learn how to resolve conflicts more effectively	3.40	0.87	1="Strongly disagree"-5="Strongly agree"
When UCLA is in session how often do you interact with a Faculty-in-Residence	2.00	1.64	1="Never"-7="Once a Day"
I know at least one campus resource I can use if I'm having personal problems	3.90	0.83	1="Strongly disagree"-5="Strongly agree"
When UCLA is in session how often do you take part in a spiritual religious practice	2.74	2.20	1="Never"-7="Once a Day"