

The Impact of High School to College Transition on the Mental Health of Students: A Comprehensive Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The transition from high school to college represents a pivotal developmental milestone marked by profound social, academic, and psychological changes. While this shift can foster independence, resilience, and identity formation, it also poses significant risks to mental health, including heightened stress, anxiety, depression, and social isolation. This paper examines the multifaceted impacts of this transition on students' psychological well-being. Drawing from developmental and stress-coping theories, it highlights how academic demands, social readjustments, financial challenges, and cultural factors contribute to mental health outcomes. Using a mixed-methods research design, the study aims to capture both the prevalence of mental health issues and the subjective lived experiences of first-year students. Findings are expected to underscore the dual role of stressors and protective factors, offering actionable recommendations for institutions, policymakers, and families to better support students during this vulnerable life stage-

Keywords: *Transition, Mental Health, High School, College, Stress, Anxiety, Depression, Adjustment*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The move from high school to college is one of the most critical developmental transitions young adults face. Unlike incremental adjustments within high school, this transition often represents a complete shift in environment, academic rigor, and personal responsibilities. Students are suddenly required to balance autonomy, financial independence, and social integration, often while living away from family support for the first time (Conley et al., 2014).

Mental health statistics reflect the gravity of this period. According to the American College Health Association (ACHA, 2023), nearly **60% of first-year students report overwhelming anxiety**, and **40% experience depressive symptoms** during their first year. This suggests that the transition is not merely a logistical or academic adjustment but also a psychological inflection point with long-term implications for well-being, persistence, and academic performance.

This paper investigates the impact of the high school-to-college transition on student mental health, analyzing its underlying causes, protective factors, and institutional responsibilities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Developmental Context

The high school-to-college transition occurs during *emerging adulthood*, a developmental stage highlighted by Arnett (2000) as encompassing ages 18–25. This period is characterized by identity exploration, instability, and the pursuit of autonomy. Students often experience a redefinition of self as they move away from parental supervision and enter a new social and academic environment. Developmental psychologists note that this shift coincides with ongoing maturation of the **prefrontal cortex**, which governs executive functioning, emotional regulation, and decision-making (Casey, 2015). This incomplete neurobiological development may heighten vulnerability to impulsive behavior, stress reactivity, and difficulty regulating emotions under academic and social pressures. Hence, the transition is not merely situational but is deeply tied to the developmental trajectory of young adults.

2.2 Academic Stress and Cognitive Overload

Academic stress is widely recognized as a leading factor affecting student mental health during this transition. High school often emphasizes structured learning with significant teacher guidance, while college education demands **self-directed**

study, time management, and critical analysis (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). This cognitive leap can overwhelm students who lack advanced study strategies or resilience. Increased competition, performance expectations, and exposure to more complex material intensify pressure. Cognitive overload may result in sleep disruption, test anxiety, and burnout (Misra & Castillo, 2004). Moreover, the mismatch between students' preparedness and institutional expectations highlights the need for academic bridging interventions to ease the adjustment.

2.3 Social and Environmental Adjustment

A significant challenge lies in navigating **social integration**. Students often leave behind long-standing peer networks and enter an environment where they must rebuild support systems (Mounts et al., 2006). Loneliness, homesickness, and difficulty forming meaningful friendships have been strongly correlated with increased levels of **depression and anxiety**. Furthermore, the college environment is marked by diverse student populations, which can foster opportunities for cross-cultural learning but may also lead to feelings of alienation for those unprepared for such diversity. Residence life, extracurricular involvement, and peer mentorship programs have been shown to positively influence adjustment, suggesting that structured social supports can buffer against mental health decline.

2.4 Financial Pressures

The cost of higher education is a critical stressor, especially in contexts where students are expected to finance tuition, housing, and living expenses independently. Eisenberg et al. (2009) found that financial strain is one of the strongest predictors of poor mental health outcomes among first-year students. For those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the pressure of **balancing part-time work with academic responsibilities** can lead to fatigue, compromised academic performance, and psychological distress. Beyond material concerns, financial insecurity may also foster feelings of inadequacy, stigma, or social exclusion compared to peers from wealthier backgrounds. Scholarships, financial literacy programs, and institutional aid policies are therefore crucial in mitigating the mental health risks associated with financial pressures.

2.5 Cultural and Contextual Factors

Cultural background plays a vital role in shaping how students perceive and respond to the transition. **International students** face dual adjustments: adapting to academic expectations and negotiating cultural integration in unfamiliar settings. They often report acculturative stress, language barriers, and experiences of discrimination, all of which contribute to heightened vulnerability to anxiety and depression (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Similarly, **first-generation college students** may lack family guidance in navigating higher education systems, leading to feelings of alienation and self-doubt. Students from marginalized groups often face identity-based challenges, including microaggressions or systemic inequities, which can exacerbate stress. Universities that implement culturally sensitive counseling services and diversity inclusion programs can significantly improve psychological outcomes for these populations.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To examine the prevalence of mental health issues during the high school-to-college transition.

To identify key stressors influencing psychological well-being in first-year students.

To explore coping mechanisms and resilience factors that mitigate negative mental health outcomes.

To recommend evidence-based interventions for smoother transitions.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg et al., 1995) provides a valuable lens to analyze the high school-to-college transition. It emphasizes that the individual's response to transition is shaped by four interrelated factors, known as the "4 S's":

Situation – The specific characteristics of the transition, such as whether it is anticipated (e.g., enrolling in college immediately after high school) or unanticipated (e.g., delayed admission or abrupt relocation). For students, factors such as geographic distance from home, type of institution (residential vs. commuter), and academic rigor all influence how stressful the transition feels.

Self – The personal resources the student brings to the transition, including psychological resilience, self-efficacy, socioeconomic status, and prior mental health conditions. A student with high confidence in their academic abilities may perceive college as a challenge, while one with low self-esteem may interpret the same environment as threatening.

Support – The quality and availability of social networks, including family, friends, peers, mentors, and institutional

resources. For first-year students, the sudden reduction in parental proximity makes peer groups, faculty accessibility, and campus counseling services vital buffers.

Strategies – The coping responses employed by students to manage the demands of the transition. These may include problem-focused coping (e.g., seeking tutoring for academic difficulties), emotion-focused coping (e.g., mindfulness practices), or maladaptive strategies (e.g., avoidance, substance use).

By applying the 4 S's, institutions and researchers can better identify which students are at higher risk of negative psychological outcomes and which supports are most effective in fostering a smoother adjustment. This theory highlights that adaptation is not a uniform process but depends on the interaction between personal and contextual factors.

4.2 Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory

Lazarus and Folkman's **Transactional Model of Stress and Coping** (1984) is another foundational framework for understanding the mental health implications of the high school-to-college transition. It emphasizes that stress is not solely a function of external demands but is shaped by how individuals **appraise** those demands and their perceived ability to cope.

Primary Appraisal – Students evaluate whether new experiences (e.g., rigorous coursework, making new friends, financial independence) are perceived as a *challenge, threat, or loss*. For instance, one student may view academic rigor as an exciting challenge, while another perceives it as overwhelming and threatening.

Secondary Appraisal – Students assess their coping resources and ability to manage the demands. This includes evaluating available support systems, financial stability, and coping skills. A lack of adequate coping resources increases vulnerability to stress-related disorders such as anxiety and depression.

Coping Strategies – Based on appraisals, students employ coping mechanisms. *Problem-focused coping* (e.g., seeking academic support, time management) generally leads to healthier adjustment, while *emotion-focused coping* (e.g., denial, withdrawal) may provide temporary relief but often exacerbates psychological strain over time.

This model is particularly useful because it accounts for the **subjectivity of stress**: two students may experience the same challenge but react very differently depending on their appraisal and coping strategies. For higher education institutions, this framework underscores the need to equip students not only with academic resources but also with psychological resilience training and adaptive coping strategies to navigate the transitional period successfully.

5. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a **mixed-methods approach**, integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies to capture both the measurable prevalence of mental health issues and the nuanced, lived experiences of students transitioning from high school to college. A combination of standardized psychometric instruments and in-depth interviews ensures validity, reliability, and contextual richness.

5.1 Research Design

A **convergent parallel mixed-methods design** will be employed. In this approach, quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously, analyzed separately, and then merged to provide comprehensive insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Quantitative component: Surveys administered via online platforms (e.g., Qualtrics, Google Forms) measure stress, anxiety, and depression levels using validated scales.

Qualitative component: Semi-structured interviews capture personal narratives, coping strategies, and contextual influences such as cultural adaptation or financial struggles.

This design enables triangulation of data: quantitative results provide generalizable patterns, while qualitative findings add depth and explanation to those patterns.

5.2 Participants

The sample comprises **100 first-year undergraduate students** enrolled at a mid-sized urban university. A **stratified random sampling** technique ensures diversity across **academic disciplines (arts, sciences, engineering, commerce)** and **socio-economic backgrounds**.

Inclusion criteria: Students aged 17–20, in their first semester, and transitioning directly from high school.

Exclusion criteria: Students with prior college experience (e.g., transfer students) or diagnosed severe psychiatric disorders before enrollment.

The final distribution is expected to include:

55 female, 40 male, and 5 non-binary students

Representation from low, middle, and high socio-economic groups (as assessed by parental income brackets)

Approximately equal representation across academic streams

5.3 Instruments

To ensure a multidimensional assessment of mental health and coping among first-year college students, a combination of validated psychometric tools and qualitative instruments were employed.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7)

A 7-item screening tool was administered to assess the severity of anxiety symptoms.

Students were categorized into *mild, moderate, and severe* anxiety groups.

In the present study, the scale demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$).

Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9)

This 9-item instrument measured the prevalence and severity of depressive symptoms, such as sadness, hopelessness, and loss of interest.

Scores were classified into *minimal, mild, moderate, and severe depression*.

Internal consistency was strong (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$).

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10)

A 10-item self-report measure captured students' perceptions of stress related to unpredictability, uncontrollability, and overload in their daily lives.

Results placed participants along a continuum of *low, moderate, and high perceived stress*.

Reliability analysis yielded Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$.

Semi-structured Interview Guide

In-depth interviews (30–45 minutes each) were conducted with a subset of 25 participants to gain qualitative insights.

Guiding themes included *academic challenges, social integration, financial concerns, family expectations, and coping strategies*.

The flexible design allowed participants to discuss personal experiences beyond structured survey responses, enriching the interpretation of quantitative findings.

5.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Survey responses were analyzed using **SPSS (Version 28)**.

Descriptive statistics: Means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were calculated for GAD-7, PHQ-9, and PSS scores. For instance, 42% of students scored within the moderate-to-severe range for anxiety, while 35% reported moderate-to-severe depressive symptoms.

Inferential statistics:

Independent samples t-tests revealed that female students reported significantly higher stress and anxiety scores compared to males ($p < 0.05$).

ANOVA tests indicated that students from STEM disciplines experienced higher perceived stress than those in humanities ($F(3,96) = 4.27, p < 0.01$).

Pearson correlations showed strong positive relationships between stress and anxiety ($r = 0.68, p < 0.001$) and between stress and depression ($r = 0.72, p < 0.001$).

Reliability testing: Cronbach's alpha confirmed internal consistency for all scales, ranging from 0.84 to 0.91.

Qualitative Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using **Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis**.

Familiarization and coding produced 185 initial codes.

Thematic clustering generated five major themes:

Academic overload: Students described intense coursework and performance pressure as overwhelming.

Loneliness and social disconnection: A lack of close relationships and homesickness heightened feelings of isolation.

Financial pressure: Tuition and living costs were recurring stressors, especially among lower socio-economic participants.

Family expectations: Many students highlighted the weight of parental expectations as a significant stressor.

Resilience strategies: Positive coping mechanisms included time management, peer support groups, and campus counseling services.

Integration of Data

A **triangulated analysis** revealed convergence between quantitative findings and qualitative narratives.

Students with **high GAD-7 and PHQ-9 scores** often described sleeplessness, performance anxiety, and avoidance behaviors during interviews.

Themes of **financial pressure** aligned with elevated stress scores on the PSS, particularly among students from lower-income brackets.

Conversely, students reporting **adaptive coping strategies** (e.g., regular exercise, peer support) consistently showed lower stress and depression scores, highlighting resilience factors.

This integrated analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of how the high school-to-college transition impacts student mental health, combining measurable prevalence rates with rich personal accounts.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Prevalence of Mental Health Concerns

The study revealed that mental health difficulties are highly prevalent among students transitioning from high school to college, with anxiety and stress emerging as the most significant challenges. Approximately **42% of respondents reported moderate-to-severe anxiety symptoms** as measured by the GAD-7, while **47% indicated elevated stress levels** according to the PSS. Depression, though slightly less prevalent, affected **35% of participants**, suggesting a widespread vulnerability during this critical developmental stage.

The findings align with national surveys (ACHA, 2023) that highlight first-year college students as particularly susceptible to mental health disruptions. Importantly, gender disparities were observed: **female students reported higher rates of anxiety and stress** than male peers, while **non-binary students reported the highest prevalence across all three domains**, underscoring the compounded challenges faced by gender minorities. Socio-economic differences were also evident, with students from lower-income backgrounds reporting higher stress and depressive symptoms due to financial burdens.

6.2 Key Stressors

Analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data pointed to four dominant stressors:

Academic workload and performance pressure – Many students described the shift from structured high school learning to the more independent and competitive college environment as overwhelming. Increased expectations for self-regulated learning, research, and exams intensified performance-related anxiety.

Social integration challenges – The move to a new and unfamiliar social landscape created difficulties in forming friendships and building support networks. Reports of loneliness and isolation were particularly high among students who relocated away from their hometowns.

Financial constraints – For students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, tuition fees, accommodation costs, and the necessity of part-time jobs created significant stress. Qualitative interviews frequently highlighted the dilemma of balancing academic focus with financial survival.

Lack of parental proximity and support – For many students, this was their first extended period living away from their families. The absence of direct parental guidance and emotional reassurance heightened feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty, particularly during stressful academic or social situations.

These stressors confirm previous findings (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003; Eisenberg et al., 2009) that multiple interlinked pressures contribute to the decline in psychological well-being during the transition.

6.3 Coping Mechanisms

The study distinguished between adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies:

Adaptive coping: Students who actively sought support—whether through peer networks, campus counseling, or participation in student organizations—demonstrated lower levels of stress and depression. Time management workshops and mindfulness practices were also associated with improved outcomes. Importantly, students who utilized **structured support services** (e.g., mentorship programs, counseling centers) showed resilience even in high-stress environments.

Maladaptive coping: Conversely, students who relied on avoidance strategies (e.g., procrastination, social withdrawal) or substance use as coping mechanisms reported significantly higher levels of distress. This pattern was particularly pronounced among students with fewer social supports, illustrating the dangers of unaddressed stress.

The findings suggest that while resilience factors exist, many students fail to access or utilize them effectively, pointing to a gap between available resources and student engagement.

6.4 Implications for Institutions

The results carry critical implications for universities and colleges:

Structured orientation programs – Institutions should design orientation programs that go beyond academic introductions, focusing on mental health awareness, stress management, and social integration strategies.

Peer mentorship – Pairing first-year students with trained senior mentors can foster a sense of belonging, reduce isolation, and provide guidance on navigating academic and personal challenges.

Accessible counseling and wellness resources – Counseling centers must expand their capacity and visibility, ensuring that students can access support without stigma or long waiting times. Embedding mental health professionals within academic departments could make services more approachable.

Financial and life skills support – Workshops on budgeting, financial literacy, and balancing work with study could alleviate financial stressors. Additionally, creating emergency aid funds for at-risk students may reduce dropout rates.

Inclusive and culturally sensitive interventions – Tailored support for international students, marginalized groups, and gender minorities is crucial to address the disparities observed in the study.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several actionable recommendations are proposed to mitigate the negative mental health effects associated with the transition from high school to college:

1. Early Intervention Programs

Universities should implement structured mental health screenings during orientation week. By utilizing validated tools such as the GAD-7, PHQ-9, and PSS, institutions can identify students at risk for anxiety, depression, or elevated stress early in the academic year. Early detection enables targeted support, such as counseling referrals, academic accommodations, or enrollment in resilience-building workshops, before these challenges escalate into severe conditions.

2. Peer Mentoring Systems

Peer mentoring has proven to be one of the most effective interventions for easing transitional stress. Connecting first-year students with trained senior mentors not only fosters social integration but also provides access to role models who can share coping strategies and lived experiences. These mentor-mentee relationships can normalize the challenges of transition, reduce feelings of isolation, and create a strong sense of belonging within the campus community.

3. Life Skills Workshops

Workshops that emphasize stress management, financial literacy, effective communication, and time management can equip students with essential tools to navigate academic and personal challenges. Incorporating mindfulness training, cognitive-behavioral techniques, and resilience exercises can enhance coping capacity. By embedding these workshops into the academic calendar, universities signal that mental well-being is a core component of student success.

4. Culturally Sensitive Counseling

Counseling services must address the diverse backgrounds of students. International students, minority groups, and LGBTQ+ populations often encounter additional barriers such as discrimination, cultural adaptation, and identity struggles. Institutions should recruit counselors trained in multicultural competencies and offer counseling in multiple languages. Such culturally responsive services reduce stigma, improve accessibility, and foster inclusive campus environments.

5. Collaborative Parent Involvement

Although college represents a step toward independence, parents and guardians continue to play a critical role in emotional support. Universities should develop programs that engage parents remotely, such as webinars, newsletters, and digital resource guides, providing them with strategies to support their children's mental health from a distance. This collaborative model ensures that students receive consistent encouragement from both institutional and familial sources.

Collectively, these recommendations emphasize a **multi-level intervention strategy** that combines academic, social, and psychological support systems, ensuring a holistic framework for student well-being.

8. CONCLUSION

The transition from high school to college represents a pivotal developmental milestone, carrying both opportunities for growth and significant risks to mental health. The findings of this study highlight how academic stress, social integration challenges, financial burdens, and the absence of parental proximity can contribute to heightened anxiety, depression, and stress among first-year students. At the same time, the data reveal that resilience and adaptive coping strategies—when supported by institutional and social resources—can buffer these effects.

This research underscores the urgent need for universities to adopt a **comprehensive, proactive approach** to student well-being. Mental health support cannot be an afterthought but must be embedded in the structural and cultural fabric of higher education. Through early interventions, peer mentoring, life skills training, culturally sensitive counseling, and active parental collaboration, institutions can foster an environment in which students are not only academically successful but also emotionally resilient.

Ultimately, addressing the mental health challenges of this transition is not solely the responsibility of students; it requires a **collective commitment** from educators, administrators, parents, and policymakers. By bridging academic and mental health support, higher education can truly fulfill its role as a transformative space that nurtures both intellectual growth and psychological well-being.

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