

Running head: HOW STRESS AND COPING STYLE AFFECT COLLEGE STUDENTS

Coping on Campus: How Stress and Coping Style Affect College Students

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## Executive Summary

This research report aims to understand the relationship between college students and their management of stress. The communal and individual coping styles (Afifi, Hutchinson, and Krouse, 2006) propose that individuals either internalize their stress management or turn to external sources to mitigate stress. College students often face a multitude of different stressors throughout their college experience, and so this research report conducted exploratory research that looked at correlations between coping style and the most common stressors college students deal with.

Research consisted of both qualitative and quantitative measures. Thematic analysis was used to look at emerging patterns among transcribed interviews and student blogs for common college stressors. Then, a survey was designed based on the results of this analysis that asked respondents to rank various stressors. Data was collected, and a means test was conducted to look for significant differences between communal and individual copers.

Results of this data found that the key differences with coping types were found in the following stressors: general stress, meeting new people, living away from home, and experiencing stress at college. There was also a positive correlation between having a part time job and the following stressors: feeling stressed and studying for finals. The research showed that communal and individual coping may have influence over certain college related stressors and that communal coping may be more effective depending on certain stressors. While this research report shows promising initial results, there were limitations related to sampling that prevent the research from fully explaining the relationship between coping type and college stressors.

## **I. Research Problem**

### **Stress, Coping, and Communication**

The process of coping is a communication phenomenon which interpersonal scholars have recently begun to study. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) originally explored the concept of coping through the ways in which individuals mitigate their stress levels. This research began a lineage of interpersonal research that has explored topics such as doctor-patient relationships (Brashers, Haas, Neidig, and Rintamaki, 2002), mediated support-seeking (Feng and Hyun, 2012), conflict management (Koerner and Fitzpatrick, 2002), and divorce (Afifi and Schrodt, 2003). More recently, research has begun exploring various types of coping within social contexts.

Afifi, Hutchinson, and Krouse (2006) frame coping as two distinct styles: individual coping and communal coping. Individual coping describes the process of dealing with stress and stressors internally, isolating their appraisal of stress from their social networks. In contrast, communal coping is a process of utilizing social support to mitigate stress. While contemporary research has applied this model to familial relations (Afifi, McManus, Hutchinson, and Baker, 2007), this research report aims to use this framework to address how students attending college universities attempt to cope with stressors from everyday life.

### **Stress and Being a College Student**

College life is an important process of socializing and learning that almost 70 percent of young adults who graduate high school will experience (USDH, 2012). Given how substantial this population has become, research into looking into the ways in which college students communicate, and the cognitive, social, and psychological effects this communication has, is

becoming increasingly important. Being successful in college requires the ability to communicate in an effective and concise manner, all while building a network of individuals from many different facets of the professional world. While this can be stressful to students attempting to navigate college life, research can help identify stressors which can be easily mediated.

Research on college life has determined that relationships play a large role in sources of stress. Bodenmann, Meuwly, Bradbury, Gmelch, and Lederman (2010) discussed the distinction of communal and individual coping in the context of relational intimacy and found that anger and verbal aggression were both a result from high stress levels in a relationship when individualized. MacGeorge, Samter, and Gillihan (2005) argue that remaining socially isolated while coping can manifest as illness and depression if allowed to cognitively accumulate. This research would indicate that while relationships are a prominent part of college life, they can be a major source of debilitating stress while attending college. This stress not only leads to ineffective, aggressive communication, but can have significant adverse health effects on students.

#### The Many Facets of Stress at College

While relationships can be a significant source of stress for students, there are many other facets of college life which compound stress levels. Ross, Niebling, and Heckert (1999) found that college students deal with a variety of interpersonal, intrapersonal, academic, and environmental stress. In addition, research has shown that something as mundane as transportation may place students at a disadvantage when attempting to connect socially with their academic peers (Davis, 1999). Considering the expectations and requirements of attending

college, students may be affected by seemingly innocuous social events. While individual stressors at college have been studied prior, little research has at stressors as interrelated in a single context, such as college life.

Even though there are many different sources of stress at college, students have a myriad of coping mechanisms at their disposal. Booth-Butterfield, Booth-Butterfield, and Wanzer (2007) argue that humor and humorous communication is a useful coping mechanism for college students dealing with stressors from college life. However, Pauley and Hess (2009) found that while stress had little to do with alcohol consumption, college students do use alcohol and substances as a way to initiate social support. The use of cognitive and physical coping mechanisms make understanding the process of students dealing with stress difficult and problematic. While research has established frameworks that inform general measures of coping (Afifi, et al., 2006) students are a unique population that do not necessarily have traditional ways of coping with stress.

This research report attempts to use the framework established by Afifi, et al. (2006) in order to understand the effects both individual and communal coping have on college students. This exploratory research tries to understand the process of how certain coping mechanisms and social events typically found throughout college life are addressed by these styles of coping. Establishing the effectiveness of coping strategies for college students can expand prior stress related research. By understanding the ways in which interpersonal relationships and external environmental factors affect college students, research can help understand the process of mediating these stressors and work towards a better model for college students to achieve success.

## Participants & Sampling Technique

Both qualitative and quantitative studies were conducted, and each method had separate samples. The qualitative study was conducted using interviews and content analysis. For the first part of the qualitative study, five individuals participated in a general interview surrounding the topic of stress and college life on campus. The unit of analysis for the initial interviews are individuals. The interviews consisted of two men and three women, all in their early twenties. Interviewees were chosen first using a quota sampling method which required five individuals who currently attend college. A convenience sample was then used to fill that stratum.

Additional qualitative research consisted of student blogs in which content analysis aimed to find themes and new dimensions of college stressors. The blogs were found using a quota sample to identify blogs centered around the topic of college life and then a non-probability convenience sample to narrow down specific blogs for the study. The unit of analysis is the individual blogs. While the sampling was focused around blogs specific to college life, content analysis looked for themes of stress and stressors.

The quantitative study used a survey which was guided by the information found during the qualitative study. The survey employed a non-probability convenience sample limited to the individuals available in the classroom at the time it was conducted. Participants ranged in age, gender, and race. A majority of the participants identified as white females. Only two participants reported that they do not use a car to travel around campus. All individuals reported that they were communication majors in a graduate program at college. Two participants identified themselves as having no job while attending college, while another two participants reported having a full time job.

## Sample Quality

Given the constraints of both time and scope of this research report, an attempt was made to ensure reliable and efficient sampling was done. While the qualitative studies employed a non-probability sample, measures were taken to filter for participants and student blogs that were relevant to the study. This allowed for a diverse, highly salient sample population. However, because it is also a convenience sample, drawing conclusions about the generalizability of the themes found is difficult. While the sample population was filtered for college students, it was limited demographically by age, location, race, and by size due to the low number of participants.

The quantitative sample had similar constraints. The population was a non-probability convenience sample that was limited to a classroom of graduate students. In addition, there was an overrepresentation of female students, and no representation of undergraduate students. While survey data derived from this group is useful to explore potential correlations, no definitive generalization can be made from this data. Future research that employs this survey or the results of this research report could conduct a similar study that operates on a larger, randomly selected population. This would extend the results with a much more precise quantitative measure.

Many of these limitations prevent generalizability from the two studies. For the nature of this research report, and the exploratory aspect of the research being conducted, the sample used can be considered adequate, but, in all cases, further research would need employ a sample that has a much broader depth and scope to fully understand the college student population. The sample is preliminary, and shows preliminary correlations and themes that can be further expanded upon with more rigorous probability sampling.



## II. Methods

### Qualitative

Qualitative data is vital in each step of the process of creating good survey questions. Original survey questions were created using pre-existing research about college students' stress and coping, and throughout the research process, survey questions are constantly edited and redeveloped to improve validity and reliability. Therefore, it is important to identify, in general, how qualitative data builds stronger close-ended survey questions, the role qualitative data played in developing the survey items, and consider what validity and reliability checks could be performed to ensure good questions. First, it is essential to discuss how qualitative data and the specific research processes help build stronger close-ended survey questions.

In order to research college students' stress and coping mechanisms, qualitative data has a significant impact on understanding the research topic. First, it is important to highlight that this survey is created with the intent of administering it specifically to Rutgers college students. First, qualitative data is gathered from Tamara Afifi, Susan Hutchinson, and Stephanie Krouse's (2006) research on coping in post divorce families, and then focus groups were conducted, and also, blogs are collected from the Rutgers Student Life blog website (see attached Appendix). After forming initial behavioral intention, attitude, behavior, opinion, and evaluative questions from the research of Afifi, et al., (2006) the next step was cognitive interviewing.

Cognitive interviewing increases validity, because sometimes there is a lack of clarity in questions and respondents do not understand the questions as the researcher intended. This process enables participants to restate in their own words what they think the meaning of a question is, and this ultimately benefits the researcher. For example, the question "Do you study

for exams?” was originally developed for this survey, but after cognitive interviewing, it is clear that this question is vague and is lacking specificity. This question can be interpreted in a number of ways such as do you study for exams in general or do you study for exams sometimes and not others. Therefore, the question needs to be modified to “Do you study before every exam?” or disregarded as a whole.

After cognitive interviewing, we redeveloped certain questions, and then gathered information from focus groups and the Rutgers Student Life Blogs website. In class, we analyzed our data through text analysis, and organized the relevant categories based on the constructs (stress, stressors, student college life, effects of stress, individual coping, and communal coping). Past research has established aspects of college students’ stress in terms of the difficulty of their classes and the amount of work received (homework, exams, and studying), but our text analysis of collective qualitative data (pre-existing research, Rutgers Student Blogs, Focus groups) suggests that there is a level of ambiguity about stress from student college life, and the levels of dimension which are not entirely established include meeting new people, living away from home, and living in a dorm.

Therefore, the survey questions measure the established constructs (stress, student college life, coping) and the levels of dimension of student college life (meeting new people, living away from home, and living in a dorm). So far, cognitive interviewing and text analysis has increased the levels of validity, and collecting consistent data from repeat focus groups (5) and multiple blogs somewhat ensures reliability, but it is necessary to define reliability and validity and discuss the different reliability and validity checks that could be performed.

(Bradburn et al., 2004)

Another method of improving reliability is checking for parallel forms of reliability. For example, two versions of the survey can be administered to the same group of individuals using different items to measure the same constructs. Validity is the quality of a question measured by the degree to which it elicits the information that the researcher desires. The Likert scale items asking participants to indicate their level of agreement is important in achieving precision, because respondents are not simply being asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement, but instead, are being asked to indicate their level of agreement. The Likert scale items measure the constructs stress at college, student college life (meeting new people, living away from home, living in a dorm), individual coping, and communal coping.

According to Norman Bradburn (2004), specific questions, exhaustive lists, mutually exclusive responses, aided recall, decreased threat level, loading techniques (i.e. “When I feel stressed, I enjoy alcoholic behaviors”, this assumes the behavior, and in order to increase validity, ‘enjoy’ decreases the threat level and attempts to frame an undesirable behavior in a positive light) are essential in improving validity. Also, it is essential in order to ensure accurate responses that the order of responses offered for each undesirable behavior question begins with the least socially desirable response, because this allows the respondent to read each of the options without just picking the first response. Finally, a conclusion of the important role qualitative data plays in building strong survey questions and improving validity and reliability is followed.

In developing these survey questions, qualitative data is an essential role throughout the research process, because it encourages the development of stronger survey questions, and therefore is essential to validity and reliability. Qualitative data helps the researcher understand

how respondents interpret questions, and allows them to revise questions, and ultimately improves validity. The relationship between qualitative data and good survey questions is interdependent, qualitative data is needed to develop good survey questions, but good survey questions are also needed to gain good qualitative data. Obtaining qualitative data and developing stronger survey questions is a cyclical process, and through repetition, the researcher gains a better understanding of the research topic.

### Quantitative

Quantitative data is integral to the research process, and therefore, it is important to address the advantages and disadvantages of quantitative research, discuss how quantitative data is used in this study, and explain how the quantitative data supports the qualitative data. As discussed in the first night of class, quantitative research is not better than qualitative research and vice versa (Doerfel, 2012). Baxter & Babbie (2003) describes the distinction between qualitative research and quantitative research as being the difference between non numerical data and numerical data. For example, a quote from the Rutgers Student Blogs, “I started off with Physics, Organic Chemistry, Calculus, and an intensive writing course. I was in way over my head” is qualitative data, because it is non numerical. In this study, a traditional paper and pencil survey was administered to supplement the qualitative research.

According to Tuten & Urban (2002), there is a higher rate of missing items from mail surveys compared to web based surveys, but noted a higher incident of socially desirable responding from email based surveys. Each survey method has advantages and disadvantages, but in administering a paper and pencil based survey to Rutgers college students, response rate can be increased by offering incentives such as extra credit. (Tuten & Urban, 2002) It is

important to note, extra credit was not offered for this survey. Survey items include questions such as “On a scale of 1 to 5, rate how strongly you agree that time management is stressful” The rating, 5, is a numerical response which quantifies the qualitative assessment, “strongly agree”, and therefore, is described as quantitative data. First, it is important to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of quantitative data.

According to Baxter & Babbie (2003), the advantages of quantitative data include more explicit observations, easier to aggregate and summarize data, and most importantly, allows for statistical analyses ranging from frequency counts, comparing the difference between means, and measuring a single variable with multiple items. Measuring a single variable with multiple items increases precision. Although quantitative data can lead to the development of mathematical models, this quantitative approach can be tedious in which there are many different ways to quantify variables.

For example, as Figure 1-1 shows, the survey asked respondents to rate their level of agreement about stress on a scale of 1 to 5, but another way to quantify these variables could have been to ask participants how stressed they feel on a scale from 1 to 10. Although, this question allows for a more precise response, it makes it difficult to categorize respondents into groups (i.e. those who strongly agree vs. those who agree). Operationalizing variables is a tedious process and is key to obtaining good data. This survey contains nominal, ordinal, interval and scale survey items which helps to quantify variables. Next, the use of quantitative data in this study is discussed.

12. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about stress at college.

	1 Strongly Agree	2 Somewhat Agree	3 Neither Agree nor Disagree	4 Somewhat Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree
a. Studying for exams is stressful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Time management is stressful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Getting to classes is stressful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Making friends is stressful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Working to pay for school is stressful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f. Extracurricular activities are stressful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g. Professors are stressful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h. Homework is stressful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
j. College is stressful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Figure 1-1: Example of survey questions using a scale of 5

After collecting survey responses, data was entered into SPSS, and nominal, scale, and interval item responses were assigned values in order to allow for statistical analyses. For example, if a respondent answered “Strongly Agree”, their response is assigned a value of “1”. This process aids in performing statistical analyses and therefore helps to develop and identify meaningful results. The bulk of the survey items included those which respondents rated their level of agreement. The remaining nominal survey items were assigned values in which a=1, b=2, c=3, d=4, etc. Also, by creating Likert type scale questions which ask participants to rate their level of agreement, participants are grouped-into numerical categories. This allows the researcher to create assumptions and generalizations about the collected data., and further bolsters qualitative findings.

The quantitative data gathered supplements the initial qualitative data by providing numerical precision for qualitative findings. For example, in the blogs and focus groups, individuals identified feeling stressed during finals, and the quantitative data illustrated there is a high frequency of individuals being stressed when studying for finals compared to other causes

of stress. (Of course, there is a disclaimer with all findings in which the findings are constrained by the small sample size)

**III. Results**

Statistical Preparation

Statistical analyses were performed in terms of descriptive statistics, difference between means, and correlation tests. Before conducting ANOVA and correlation tests, basic descriptive statistics were collected through frequency tests as seen in Figure 1-1. Demographics include n=14 (male ‘1’=2, female ‘2’=12), the sample consisted of all graduate students, ethnicity (white=10, black=2, asian=1, and other=1), student status (full time=11, part time=3), and job status (No Job=2, Full time=2, Part time=2). After establishing fundamental demographic statistics, difference of mean tests were conducted.

**is difficult**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Somewhat Agree	5	35.7	38.5	38.5
	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	2	14.3	15.4	53.8
	Somewhat Disagree	4	28.6	30.8	84.6
	Strongly Disagree	2	14.3	15.4	100.0
	Total	13	92.9	100.0	
Missing	System	1	7.1		
Total		14	100.0		

Figure 1-1: Frequency test on the difficulty of living at college variable

Communal or Individual Coper

Participants were defined as either communal copers or individual copers based on survey data related to both coping types. Responses to survey statements such as “When I feel stressed, I walk” or “When I feel stressed, I attend parties” operationalized a self-reported

definition of communal and individual coping. Respondents were then categorized on a binary scale as to whether they were primarily a communal or individual coper. Using the defined coping type, a comparative statistical analysis was conducted to look at the effects of college life and stressors on respondents between individual and communal coping.

### Reliability Checks

In order to identify significant difference of means, reliability checks were performed to determine how accurately multiple items measure central variables such as stress at college, meeting new people, living away from home, living in your dorm, effects of stress, individual coping, and communal coping). All reliability checks were .7 or higher except for living in a dorm (the conveniency sample constrained obtaining results from students living on campus), which, considering the small sample size is quite exceptional. After conducting reliability checks, ANOVA tests were performed for each variable to determine differences between means compared to communal and individual copers. ANOVA test results is followed.

### Difference of Means

ANOVA test results produced significant differences among communal and individual copers in terms of effects of stress, meeting new people, living away from home, and experiencing stress at college. Figure 2-1 shows an ANOVA means test looking at the significance of college stressors and coping style. The effects of stress produced a significant difference ( $p=.045$ ) between individual (mean=2) and communal copers (mean=3) in which individual copers' health suffers more than communal copers when stressed. Another significant difference ( $p=.059$ ), individual copers (mean=2.3) report more stress when meeting new people compared to communal copers (mean 3.6).



		F	Sig.
studying for exams is stressful * copetype	Between Groups (Combined)	3.231	.097
	Within Groups		
	Total		
time management is stressful * copetype	Between Groups (Combined)	.343	.569
	Within Groups		
	Total		
getting to classes is stressful * copetype	Between Groups (Combined)	1.091	.317
	Within Groups		
	Total		
making friends is stressful * copetype	Between Groups (Combined)	5.606	.036
	Within Groups		
	Total		
working to pay for school is stressful * copetype	Between Groups (Combined)	.847	.376
	Within Groups		
	Total		

*Figure 2-1: Example of college related stressors being compared in an ANOVA test*

Items measuring living away from home produced two significant findings. Communal copers (mean=3.7,  $p=.009$ ) somewhat disagree that living away from home is stressful compared to individual copers (mean=2.3,  $p=.009$ ) who somewhat agree living away from home is stressful. Additionally, communal copers (mean=1.5,  $p=.026$ ) like living away more than individual copers (mean=2.8,  $p=.026$ ). Lastly, there is a significant difference ( $p=.036$ ) in which making new friends is more stressful for individual copers (mean=2) than communal copers (3.4). Next, correlations are discussed.

### Significant Correlations

Bivariate correlation tests revealed having a part time job positively correlates with feeling stressed when studying for finals ( $r=.83$ ). Also, being a commuter positively correlates with being stressed with meeting new people ( $r=.69$ ). After reporting the statistical results, it is necessary to address the unique nature of this research in which a small convenient sample is

utilized (14 graduate students). Therefore, it is necessary to interpret the results and key findings based on the former constraints.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

##### Overview and Core Lessons

Frequencies, ANOVA, and correlation tests were conducted in order to identify key findings and differences between communal and individual coping and to further supplement existing qualitative research. The statistical research establishes key differences among communal coping and individual coping of stress in college in terms of the effects of stress, meeting new people, living away from home, and experiencing stress at college. Also, the positive correlation between having a part time job and feeling stressed studying for finals bolsters qualitative research. During focus group interviews and text analyses of blogs, there are numerous reports of students who have part time jobs experiencing increased levels of stress studying for finals. The statistical results and qualitative support for this finding serves as an interesting beginning for further exploratory research.

All in all, it is important to note the key differences among communal and individual copers in which the trend among individual copers is that they feel more stress in social settings as opposed to communal copers who experience less stress among others (i.e. making new friends). The core findings of this research stem from the importance of creating good survey questions, the benefits of multi-method research (i.e. qualitative and quantitative), and finally, generating meaningful findings about communal and individual coping from an extensive research process.

##### Recommendations

For a growing number of Americans stress is based on unrealistic perceptions, i.e. feelings of inadequacy, non-directed anxiety, generalized fear or uncertainty, resentments and jealousies. For college students these perceptions may become magnified. Many must adjust to being away from home for the first time, maintaining a high level of academic achievement and assimilating into a new social environment. This combination can induce a high level of stress which may result in feelings of loneliness, nervousness, sleeplessness and high levels of worry (Wright, 1967).

Because problem solving, decision making and personal stress management are also considered interpersonal skills a further study into how interpersonal skills can be developed might be useful in helping college students recognize, understand and deal with possible sources of stress. Future studies might examine whether there is a greater acceptance of so-called alternative approaches to stress reductions such as jogging, yoga or meditation as opposed to medication such as tranquilizers and antidepressants.

It is clear that communication skills can go a long way toward eliminating interpersonal situations that can lead to stress-inducing tension. Stress management training sessions may be useful on college campuses as a way to address stress-inducing uncertainty issues among student populations. An academic course in stress management which would include stress-reducing strategies should be included and widely publicized as an element of the Communication curricula at educational institutions. These curricula might help with understanding how high pressure situations negatively impact academic performance by compromising working-memory resources that could otherwise be devoted to academic endeavors (Beilock, 2011).

One category for examination might be to classify undergraduates according to their academic majors. A contemporary examination of stress differences between “hard” and “soft” science majors, for example (Myrtek, 1997) might explore useful interventions. Future studies may examine the potential for additional stress levels among students of nationalities or cultures who may be in the process of assimilating into the mainstream U.S. culture. Being less identified with U.S. culture has been associated with higher psychological distress and clinical depression (Hwang, 2008).

#### Shortcomings

Because our survey involved a convenience sample, and a very limited sampling at that, our results are not generalizable to a larger student population. With that acknowledgement the following items are submitted for further review:

- Our findings did not determine which sources of stress lead to the highest stress levels among college students. This metric could be useful in creating stress management programs. (Ross, 1999).
- We did not ask in our survey how respondents identified their meaning of stress, or include a question about how those stress symptoms manifested. It is likely that stress is different for each individual. It may also have been useful to determine whether stress was caused by an everyday hassle or major life event. This difference could be the cause of either minor or acute stressors (Randall, 2009).
- Our data included racial identifications. It might have been useful to determine whether sources of stress differ across cultures or ethnicities.

- Our data may also have revealed whether stress is experienced differently by gender or generation since those variables were included in our survey. Another useful metric would have been whether respondents were taking any medications for stress reduction.
- In terms of individual coping with stress, a question about whether stress could actually be a motivator might have been useful, since it is possible that moderate amounts of stress can increase academic performance (Moore, 1992).
- By identifying and explicating these metrics we could have enriched our contributions toward further study which may lead to more insightful stress management interventions

## Conclusion

This research report aimed to understand the relationship between college students and their management of stress. Utilizing two different types of studies, the report was able to identify the major sources of stress that college students face. Through interviews and content analysis, similarities arose which were then tested using survey data. As college students deal with a wide variety of stressors, understanding the relationship they have with coping is key to further evaluating better methods of mitigating stress. Given the limitation in scope of the survey, results explore potential generalizability of coping style and various stressors.

Findings show that there are clear differences between individual and communal coping while attending college. These differences can have an impact on a student's ability to focus, study, be social, and succeed at college. Poor stress management can lead to cognitive and physical health complications, and given the multitude of stressors found at college, further research is both urgent and needed. Understanding relationships between specific stressors and how they can be mitigated through coping is a potential direction future research can take.

Stress is an unavoidable aspect of being social. There will always be events and sources of stress that individuals encounter. Rather than focusing on avoiding stress, individuals can utilize their ability to cope effectively to mitigate any harmful effects from stressors. In high-stakes high-pressure environments, such as college, dealing with stress is much more than an annoyance. It can mean the difference between excelling in classes and succeeding in all facets of college life. This research shows that there are solutions for stress management through coping style in a college environment.

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## Appendix

### Qualitative Study Part A: Focus Group Interviews

#### Interview 1: Susan

John: For some background on what we're studying, we're looking at stress triggers in every day college life. College can be a stressful experience and we're interested in understanding what those experiences are and how individuals cope and manage them. First, if you could, give me what you consider to be an average day living on campus.

Susan: Average day? I wake up, usually make my own breakfast, walk over to College Ave, catch the bus to class. My earliest class is about 9:50 so that's not bad and then my latest class is about 6:30 so it's not too bad of a schedule.

John: Okay. And then that afterwards you just go home and do your homework and stuff?

Susan: Pretty much. Once I go home, I fix dinner and hang out with some friends but usually homework.

John: So out of the average day, what do you feel causes you the most stress? What do you think in your schedule causes you the most stress while at college?

Susan: Honestly, the homework has to be the most stressful. Out of my entire schedule, getting organized and getting what I need for class and then getting home and having to read forty pages a class and then writing papers because I have roommates it's not always easy to get some quiet time.

John: So how do you cope with that then? Obviously you do your work and get everything done so what's your strategy for dealing with that?

Susan: I tend to spend a lot of time in the library otherwise I can't really. If I don't really want to go to the library I'll go to a friend's room and study with them for a while.

John: So you would say that your way of coping is putting yourself in places that allow you to work and maybe aren't as distracting?

Susan: Yes.

John: Okay. In regards to stress from living at college and dealing with social activities and things like that, how do you, in general, relieve your stress? What do you do?

Susan: I would say that I self-medicate with alcohol every Friday night. Yeah, self-medicating with alcohol and fat sandwiches every Friday night. It gets down.

John: Do you consider that healthy or unhealthy?

Susan: I'm not too fond of drinking so I'll go out with some friends, have a drink or two, grab something to eat. It's just a chance to relax at least once a week. For the most part I'm home on the weekends so that's also a really nice break.

John: So would you describe it as a vice or do you have any very unhealthy ways to deal with stress at school? Or is that really it?

Susan: I don't smoke, I only drink and I don't drink that much so i can't say that would be one. I tend to stress myself out by putting more on my plate then I should be able to handle until I start to manage my time a lot more and that's actually helping a lot. I have like four planners and I'm constantly writing notes to myself so I'm not stressing last minute Sunday night trying to write four papers.

John: Okay. Out of all of these ways to deal with stress, what are the lasting effects of them? Do you think they're temporary, permanent, useful, not useful?

Susan: Give me a second. Of the alcohol?

John: The alcohol, getting your work done early, just all together. The ways that you deal with stress.

Susan: If I don't graduate with a tick or anything, I'll be pretty happy. College is supposed to be stressful.

John: My next question is, what would you describe is the main difference between living at home and living at college?

Susan: Okay. You learn to be a lot more self-sufficient living at home, you have to manage your time a whole lot better. You have to wake up earlier then if you live on campus, to get to school, to get to work. You have to make sure you have everything you need for the day because you can't just walk back to your apartment and get your books for ten minutes and go back and get what you need. Also, usually if you're living at home then it's for financial reasons so you're probably working or you have family so you're probably busy with family a lot and it's a lot to manage with school work and other activities that you do on campus. It's a lot more stress and time management and financials. I feel like you definitely try to focus on your studies more because I know a lot of people who dorm and they just go nuts. their grades will drop unbelievably because they don't have someone there nagging them on.

John: So would you say it is more or less stressful?

Susan: More so, definitely more so.

John: So living at home would be more stressful than living at college?

Susan: Yes.

John: Do you think that living at home is easier to cope with the stress at either one? Like to deal with it? Like even though college life is less stressful do you think it's easier to cope with the stress at home?

Susan: I mean, I can't speak for all kids that live on campus, but it's a lot easier. They don't worry about mommy and daddy paying for their dorm room. They don't think about it. They don't worry about how much money they spend every day when they buy food on campus.

John: Right.

They don't have to worry about paying for gas to make sure that they can get to school during the week. Making sure they catch their train. You have to be a lot more responsible.

John: Okay. The last question I'm going to ask is do you belong to any clubs, groups, or activities and could you tell me any of the responsibilities you have in them.

Susan: Currently I only belong to one. I guess you could call it a club. I'm in the National Honors Fraternity. I pledged last fall and now I'm the recruitment chair so it's a lot of planning, setting up rooms, especially with Rutgers because they're not always on top of their game.

John: Right.

Susan: But, it's a lot more responsibility than I'm used to because I've never really held a position in anything. It's a lot more making people and your friends proud, do good for them.

John: What was your reason for joining?

Susan: For what?

John: What was your reason for joining the National Honors Society?

Susan: I thought it was a great idea because they're very involved in education which is the field I'm going into. They do a lot of community service and they're just very friendly, normal, and inviting.

John: Do you feel like dealing with all the responsibilities adds to your stress or helps you manage your stress?

Susan: It definitely does add stress to my life because now I'm in grad school and I have to worry about writing papers and making observations for my practicum and writing lessons plans, but it's also great to know that two nights a week we have events planned and I can go and hang out with my friends and we're going to do something, learn something. So, it's stressful but it's a really good reason to want to go back to school.

John: So it almost makes the stress fun.

Susan: Yeah, exactly.

Interview 2: Kevin

John: The objective for the study is that we're looking at stress triggers on campus. College can be a stressful experience and we're interested in understand what those stressful things are and how individuals cope and manage them. The first question is what for you is an average day living at college?

Kevin: Get up, go to class, go to home or go back to the dorm.

John: What do you feel out of that routine causes you the most stress?

Kevin: The amount of work that the teachers give.

John: That's the only stress? Are there a couple of different ones?

Kevin: That's the only thing. At that moment your class is the only thing you have going on in life.

John: How do you typically deal with the stress that comes from dealing with coursework? What ways do you cope?

Kevin: I don't. I just get it all done. I don't stress about it.

John: So you just get it out of the way, deal with it?

Kevin: Yeah, pretty much.

John: As far as every day stress at school, how do you deal with being at school and dealing with people and teachers and everyday life? Are you able to deal with the everyday stress?

Kevin: Basically just tackle it. You understand what's causing your stress you do it and then it's over and done. There's nothing special I do.

John: Do you have a vice or something you do to waste time that helps you deal with stress like a hobby?

Kevin: Not really I just suck it up and do it and then it gets done. Then I can enjoy whatever.

John: Do you think that's healthy or unhealthy?

Kevin: I think that it's very healthy. Don't cry about your problems, just go and do it and then it won't be a problem any more.

John: What do you think the effect of that is? Do you think it helps you get everything done faster? How would it affect other people?

Kevin: I think it does work. By tackling stress causing problems head on it makes it go away. You know what it is, go do it, get it done. On to the next thing. Then there's nothing stressing you out.

John: Ok. So, what are the differences between home and college life?

Kevin: Commuting versus dorming?

John: Just living at home before college and then while at college.

Kevin: It's easier while at college because you can devote more of your life to it. You're not traveling back and forth for hours. You can go to class five minutes before it starts instead of leaving an hour before it starts so you have a lot more free time and that time can be used for doing all that work you have to get done. It's much easier.

John: So it's much less stressful than home life?

Kevin: Yeah. between what's going on at home, traveling, when you're living at school - it's essentially like school is your life so you can devote more time to it.

John: The last question is do you belong to any clubs, groups or activities and could you list some of the responsibilities you had in them.

Kevin: The only thing I do is the Accounting Society which was only a couple meetings a semester. You go for like an hour long information session, someone would come and talk to you. The only thing I ever did was sit and listen.

John: Why did you join? What was your reason behind it?

Kevin: I'm going into the accounting profession and they're passing out knowledgeable stuff so it's just bettering myself.

John: Right. And so you did all these activities for the accounting society, do you think they helped you avoid, manage, or deal with stress? Or did they add on to your stress with course work?

Kevin: I think it had no effect whatsoever.

Interview 3: Erica

John: To give you some background on what we're studying, we're looking at stress triggers in every day college life. College can be a stressful experience and we're interested in understanding what those experiences are and how individuals cope and manage them. To start the interview off, could you take me through what an average day is like at college?

Erica: I'm a music major. So, a large majority of my classes are related to music. I wake up and the first thing I do is have my voice lessons with my instructor. That's about an hour. After that I go to my music theory class and it's tough and pretty stressful. Math for music majors. After that I have a quick bite to eat and then I go to a music composition class where we learn piano and guitar. After that, I usually hit a practice room just to train. Then I head back to my dorm.

John: So what do you feel out of that whole routine causes you the most stress?

Erica: I would say the music theory stuff. It's really difficult. I've never been really good at math and it's one of those classes that's so fundamental to everything you learn. Screw up in that and it effects every single class you take.

John: How do you cope with the stress that comes from that class? What are some ways you deal with managing such a difficult course workload?

Erica: I would say that I probably don't really cope with it at all. I know that sounds horrible, but I'm just so busy with all the other classes that I just try to get through it. I have some really good friends that have a handle on it and we work together to work and kind of figure it out, but I just try to get through it. I don't think I cope with the stress at all.

John: Wouldn't you say that just dealing with it and getting through it is ultimately I way of coping?

Erica: I guess so. But I think what happens is that I don't deal with the stress in the moment so I don't develop coping strategies. It builds up until it all explodes.

John: So moving away from one particular stressful part of your life, but more in general, how do you deal with overall stress that comes from school and living on campus.

Erica: I'm a dancer and I'm part of the dance team here. I try to get as much... I try to deal with it through physical activity. I lead one of the yoga groups here and I've gotten a lot of stress relief from that and the dance group. Get those endorphins kicking.

John: Do you consider those activities to healthy or unhealthy?



Erica: Yeah, I think it's healthy. I think it's one of the best ways you can deal with stress. When I was younger I would deal with it by eating myself into a frenzy or getting really upset, but now I just channel that through my activities when I can.

John: So do you have any vices that you do to help deal with stress or at least mitigate it?

Erica: I bite my nails and I do smoke cigarettes from time to time. It's really bad, but it's not like a regular thing, it's just kind of a once in a while thing. I'm not addicted or anything. I also like a little vodka before bed sometimes.

John: What do you think are the effects of the ways you manage? Both the vices and the healthier stuff. Do you think they're permanent, useful?

Erica: I like to think that the discipline I've developed through yoga will be permanent. It's been something that's really helpful for me. Dancing is so much fun. I'm not addicted to cigarettes or alcohol so I don't think it's permanent and I don't think it has a big effect on my life.

John: Would you ever seek advice or reach out to anyone to cope with that stress? Or do you kind of just take everything in by yourself.

Erica: I'm not the kind of person who pushes their problems on other people. I wouldn't reach out to anybody.

John: So you would just deal with it by yourself?

Erica: Yeah, I would. I mean, I guess if I was really having problems I would talk to somebody. But I mean, why bother? You push people away that way.

John: Ok. My next question is more about home and college life comparisons, so could you tell me what you think the main differences are between your home life before college and your college life now that your living on campus?

Erica: Well, my home life was ok. It could be stressful at times. My parents were pretty supportive. They were in the arts and everything, so they understand the passion and everything. I have some pretty serious problems with my younger sister who has had some drug issues. She's been in and out of rehab. So that's been pretty stressful. You know, once I got to college it just kind of fell into my own. I've really found a good core group of people who are just as passionate as I am.

John: Do you think that it's more or less stressful at home or college?

Erica: I think it's much more stressful at home. I mean, living with someone who has such a serious addiction sometimes can be pretty awful.

John: Even though there is more stress at home, do you feel like it's easier or harder to cope?

Erica: I feel like it's easier now. At college I have so many outlets. I have my yoga group and all my musical activities and my dancing. I have so many ways to deal with stress now.

John: My final question is, do you belong to any clubs groups or activities and what are some of your responsibilities?

Erica: Well, this is kind of embarrassing, but I'm part of a secret society for Harry Potter. It's a Harry Potter fan club. It's called Moony, Padfoot, Wormtail, and Prongs. It's just this really big Harry Potter fan club. Other than that, I'm part of the dance team and I lead the yoga group. I'm involved in a lot of musical activities. I play everything from the piano to the ukulele. I do musicals every year too.

John: What made you join all these groups?

Erica: I was just so ecstatic to go to a place where there were so many Harry Potter nerds. That's been hugely fun for me. I discovered that was on this campus and I couldn't wait to be a part of it. The other things kind of go to my creative passion. It's what I love to do, I couldn't help but be a part of it.

John: Do you feel like these activities help you avoid or manage stress, or do you think they add to your stress?

Erica: I think I have a habit of overbooking myself. I tend to do a lot more than I probably should be doing. I really don't have a lot of free time, except late at night.

Interview 4: Allen

John: Ok. So we're trying to identify stress triggers in everyday college life on campus. College can be a stressful experience and were interested in understanding what those stresses are and how individuals cope and manage them. The first question is what for you is an average day at college and what does it consist of?

Allen: An average day for me would be waking up, rushing to get to class cause I'm usually a little late. I go to class, I do what I have to do there. Afterwards I go to work and then I come back and read for all the classes I have to read for and then I go to sleep pretty late.

John: Okay so out of that routine what do you feel causes you the most stress?

Allen: Mostly the lack of sleep. I don't have enough time.

John: So because you're doing so much you have no time to wind down?

Allen: Yeah.

John: How do you cope with that? How do you deal with all that stress from lack of sleep?

Allen: I do the best I can. I realize I can't really stop so I just keep going and I do the best I can.

John: Okay so, instead of that particular stress, in general how do you relieve stress? what are some things you do to relieve the stress of school and college life?

Allen: The biggest one would be hanging out with friends and blowing steam that way. It's always laughter is the best medicine.

John: So you think spending time with friends and hanging out with people is a good way to deal with stress?

Allen: Yeah.

John: Would you describe that as healthy or unhealthy?

Allen: I'd say provided it doesn't interfere with what you need to get done, it's healthy.

John: Okay. Do you have any vices that help you mitigate stress? Things you do that aren't healthy or good for you, especially when you're really stressed.

Allen: I eat a lot when I'm really stressed.

John: Anything in particular?

Allen: You know... sweets... num nums.

John: Would you ever seek advice when you're very stressed? Would you seek out others or reach out to other people to help cope?

Allen: Probably not.

John: So even though you hang out with friends to deal with stress, you wouldn't actually seek them out to directly deal with it.

Allen: I might talk to them about what's on my mind but I wouldn't talk to my teachers and see if they can lighten the load. I wouldn't talk to whoever the source of the stress is.

John: Do you feel that the ways you deal with the stress are effective? Do you feel that they are temporary? Permanent? Useful?

Allen: I think it's useful and temporary because the sources of my stress right now are permanent and they will keep coming. The way I deal with the stress helps me tolerate it. The stress will keep building over time. It doesn't really go away.

John: Okay, that's perfectly fine. The next question is what would you describe is the main difference between living at home and living at college.

Allen: The biggest difference is the financial end of it. You get more financial support living at home. That can be a significant source of stress if you're juggling work.

John: In terms of general living...

Allen: There's not too much of a difference. You still have stuff to take care of at home. For me personally, I have to wash my own laundry, clean my own stuff. Living at school dealing with a roommate is similar to being with people who live in your home. It's not too much of a big deal. I don't think it's a big difference for the stress.

John: Would you describe home or college life as more stressful?

Allen: I don't know. I think they're about the same - they just stress you out differently.

John: Do you think it's easier to cope with the stress of one or the other or would you say it's the same?

Allen: I'd say it's easier to cope with stress at school because it's easier to be honest with your peer groups than it can be at home sometimes.

John: So just to restate - you would say that the level of stress isn't so different but its easier to cope with that stress at school.

Allen: Yes.

John: Okay, the last question. Do you belong to any clubs, groups, or activities? What are your responsibilities?

Allen: When it comes to school I don't really get involved. Outside of school, I'm in the Marine Corps Reserves so that takes a nice amount chunk of my attention. It's stressful to juggle that with school and work. My plate is pretty full.

John What are your responsibilities in the Marine Corps?

Allen: I train as an artillery man. I'm a corporal so I make sure that my junior Marines are doing what they need to do, how they need to do it, and safely. So it's pretty stressful. There are higher ups coming down on you and at the same time trying to juggle what your subordinates are trying to do.

John: What was your reason for joining?

Allen: It was a lot of different reasons. I guess the biggest one was for the experience.

John: Finally, do you feel like being in the marines helps you avoid or manage stress or does it add to your stress?

Allen: It definitely adds to my stress but at the same time the Marine Corps gave me internal tools to deal with stress better so it gives me more stress but it's taught me how to deal with it so it doesn't weigh me down as much.

John: So you think even though it gives you more stress it doesn't weigh you down so it helps you deal with that stress at the same time?

Allen: Yeah.

John: Okay, that's it actually.

Interview 5: Julia

John: To give you some background on what we're studying, we're looking at stress triggers in every day college life. The objective for what we're looking to research is we are looking at stress triggers in everyday college life on campus. College can be a stressful experience and we're kind of interested in understanding what those experiences are and how individuals cope and manage them. To start the interview off, could you take me through what an average day is like at college?

Julia: Well on Mondays I have my biggest day. I have three classes and an early morning class which is tough for me. So I get up at about 8 am, I pour myself a bowl of cereal, I hop in the shower, and then I run over to my 8 am class on college ave. Then I have, after that, I have a break and then I have two more classes one right after the other. I then get home and, you know, it's the first day of the week so I tend to procrastinate. I'll probably watch some tv on my laptop and try to get to some homework in the evening.

John: What do you feel causes you the most stress out of your activities during the day?

Julia: Well, the classes themselves don't really cause me a lot of stress. I really enjoy them and like to participate in class. I ask lots of questions and love the learning process. Probably, the most stressful part of my day is sitting down and getting the actual work done. Actually sitting down and doing the papers, studying for the tests, and so on. I'd say that those really late nights from struggling to get everything done for the class the next day is probably the most stressful part of my day.

John: How do you deal with that stress? What is your strategy for coping with all the stresses that come from those activities?

Julia: I make a lot of lists. I find that if I can kind of pan out exactly what it is that I have to do step by step, that it's much easier for me and it becomes a lot less scary. I make sure that I write down each individual thing that has to get done and then I get some satisfaction by crossing of each thing as it gets done. That's really the way I cope with the work being stressful.

John: In general, how do you relieve stress at school?

Julia: I spend a lot of time with my boyfriend watching movies or tv or you know, going out to eat while we can. I watch a lot of really really trash tv just to kind of turn my brain off and take my mind off of it like Project Runway and things like that.

John: Do you consider those activities to be healthy or unhealthy?

Julia: Probably a little bit of both. The stuff with my boyfriend is probably healthy and a good use of my time. Sometimes when I start watching tv on my laptop I start watching one episode after another and I wouldn't say that's particularly healthy.

John: Do you have any vices that help with deal with stress? Do you have any things that are really really bad for you that you go and do anyway? Especially when your really stressed?

Julia: I tend to probably eat things that aren't very good for me. I have a big sweet tooth and I probably reached for some Ben and Jerry's or things like that when I'm trying to cope with the stress.

John: Would you ever seek advice or reach out to someone to help deal with stress?

Julia: I do pretty commonly. I mean, I'm not someone who tends to lock up how I'm feeling. I would say that it's pretty easy for my to express myself to those close around me.

John: So the ways you deal with stress, the vices and the activities you were explaining to me, what do you think the effects of that stress management is?

Julia: Well, I guess it depends how you look at it. I mean, I would say that I don't think any of it is temporary because if I'm spending my time procrastinating when I should be working, in the long run that's going to effect the amount of work I actually get done. I wouldn't say that the bad eating is a permanent effect because it's not to the point where its really effecting my body or my life or anything like that but it's definitely not a good thing. I would say that falling into bad habits of procrastinating is probably a pretty... I wouldn't say it's permanent but I wouldn't say it's temporary either.

John: Very interesting answer. The next question is more focused on college life. If you could describe to me the main differences between living at home and now that you're living on campus.

Julia: I mean, the biggest difference, and I noticed this when I was a freshman, is that there is no one monitoring you anymore. I really notice that there is no mom looking over your shoulder saying "did you get your homework done?" You know, you really have to be responsible for yourself and nobody is going to force you to get anything done. You're taking responsibility for your grades and your schoolwork.

John: Would you say that living at home or college is more or less stressful than the other?

Julia: I would actually say that, for me, just because of my family situation, it's less stressful for me to live at school than to live at home. But that's based on my own personal family situations.

John: So even though living at home is more stressful than living at college, would you say that it's easier to cope at one rather than the other? To deal with that stress?

Julia: Really depends on what the stress is. If it's stress from relationships its easier to deal with that stress at college because I don't have the interactions from my family that cause stress. If it's stress from like, schoolwork, it's easier to deal with that at home because I'm not dealing with college when I'm not at home.

John: Do you belong to any clubs, groups, or activities and what are some of your responsibilities in them?

Julia: Well, I'm really heavily involved in the arts so I sing in my church choir, and I'm a featured soloist, so I have a lot of responsibilities in preparing for that. I'm also involved with writing. I have obligations with deadlines and reporting and making those obligations.

John: What made you join some of those groups?

Julia: Before I transferred to Rutgers, I was a music education major at Caldwell College and I was studying vocal music. I'm classically trained to sing and it's something I've been doing all my life and it's something that kind of relaxes me and makes me kind of feel in the zone. So I just know I'll always keep doing that in some way or another. I want to be a journalist so writing helps with that too.

John: Do you feel like some of those responsibilities help manages stress or do you feel like they add more stress?

Julia: I feel writing deadlines add more stress. I feel like thats one more project I have to finish. It's a big commitment, but it's going to be worth it in the long run. Being part of a choir helps me relieve stress. It's just kind of a fun escapist activity for me.



## Qualitative Study Part B: Student Blogs

### List of Rutgers Student Blogs

<http://admissions.rutgers.edu/BLOGS/STUDENTS/post/2012/05/03/Phone-a-Friende280a6Or-a-Scarlet-Listener.aspx>

<http://admissions.rutgers.edu/BLOGS/STUDENTS/post/2012/01/24/Its-Just-One-of-Thoe-Days.aspx>

<http://admissions.rutgers.edu/BLOGS/STUDENTS/post/2012/01/24/Theree28099s-No-Place-Like-Home-Away-From-Home.aspx>

<http://admissions.rutgers.edu/BLOGS/STUDENTS/post/2012/01/08/Fall-2011-in-review.aspx>

<http://admissions.rutgers.edu/BLOGS/STUDENTS/post/2012/01/07/Choosing-a-different-fork.aspx>

<http://admissions.rutgers.edu/BLOGS/STUDENTS/post/2012/02/18/Avoidance-Tactics-and-Epic-Stories.aspx>

<http://admissions.rutgers.edu/BLOGS/STUDENTS/post/2012/03/03/Anyone-else-out-there-feel-that-crushing-pressure.aspx>

<http://admissions.rutgers.edu/BLOGS/STUDENTS/post/2012/04/26/Long-time-no-see!.aspx>

<http://admissions.rutgers.edu/BLOGS/STUDENTS/post/2012/05/03/Phone-a-Friende280a6Or-a-Scarlet-Listener.aspx>

<http://admissions.rutgers.edu/BLOGS/STUDENTS/post/2012/05/12/My-Freshman-Year-in-its-Entirety-082911-050912.aspx>

<http://admissions.rutgers.edu/BLOGS/STUDENTS/post/2012/06/08/Freshman-Year-in-Review.aspx>

<http://admissions.rutgers.edu/BLOGS/STUDENTS/post/2012/10/02/Finding-A-Balance.aspx>

**Quantitative Study: Survey**

See attached appendix: Communal Coping College Students Survey.pdf