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BRIEF REPORT



Gender differences in stress levels among Southeast Asian American college students

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Objectives: The objectives of the study were to identify sources of stress and examine stress levels by gender among students of Southeast Asian descent. **Participants:** Six hundred and five Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Vietnamese, and Other Southeast students from 12 community colleges across the United States. **Methods:** Students completed the Community College Success Measure administered between 2015 and 2018. **Results:** More than 50% of male students in the study have experienced food and housing insecurities, transportation issues, and legal concerns. Results from the independent samples *t* tests indicated that female students reported more stress associated with health and transportation issues in comparison to male students. **Conclusions:** College health professionals should focus on targeted outreach efforts toward Southeast Asian students and need to consider gender differences in the delivery of psychoeducational groups related to stress reduction and management for this student population.

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Introduction

Stress continues to be a top presenting concern among college students. A recent Spring 2019 report from the American College Health Association (ACHA) of approximately 68,000 college students across 98 institutions found that 57.6% of all respondents reported experiencing more than average stress or tremendous stress.¹ This represents a 3.9% increase from 2015. Moreover, an examination by male and female students provides an understanding of how stress levels vary across gender groups. While 47.1% of male students reported more than average stress or tremendous stress, 61.5% of female students reported these same levels of stress.¹ Even more alarming is that stress is identified as the leading factor among 30 other factors to negatively impact the academic performance and experience of college students.¹ These data suggest that more empirical research is needed to better understand college students and stress among gender groups, particularly the sources of stress.

Prior research has documented the different categories of stressors among college students. A comprehensive review of the stress literature identified the following stressors for college students: relationships (e.g., family, romantic), lack of resources (e.g., money, support), expectations (e.g., self, others), academics (e.g., classes, studying), environment (e.g., disruptive, unfamiliar), transitions (e.g., to the institution), diversity (e.g., racial minority, first-generation), and other (e.g., career, cocurricular).² Their results support the findings of other studies that also examined common sources of stress for college students.^{3–5} In addition, several studies have found that female college students associate more

stress with their experiences of stressors.^{6–8} For example, Pierceall and Keim⁸ conducted a quantitative study where 212 community college students completed the Perceived Stress Scale.⁹ They found that perceived stress differed by gender where female students reported significantly more stress than male students.⁸ These findings suggest that outreach efforts and interventions such as psychoeducational groups must account for how stress vary by gender.

The extant literature has provided insights into stressors among college students and how stress levels vary by gender. However, the extent to which these sources of stress are also experienced by ethnically diverse college student populations is limited, particularly for students from Southeast Asian descent (e.g., Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Vietnamese). These few studies on Southeast Asian American (SEAA) college students have focused primarily on concerns of transition to the university,¹⁰ lack of support,^{11,12} and expectations¹³ but did not specifically address the levels of stress associated with each stressor experienced. As such, the current study aims to address these gaps in the literature by including a wider range of stressors and examine stress levels associated with each stressor experienced by gender. The purpose of this study was to examine the different sources of stress and how stress levels vary between male and female SEAA college students. The current study was guided by two research questions: (1) What stressors do SEAA college students experience? and (2) Are there significant gender differences among levels of stress SEAA college students associate with the experienced stressors? Findings from this study can help to inform culturally sensitive and responsive

Table 1. Gender differences among levels of stress for each stressor experienced by Southeast Asian American college students.

Stressor	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> (two-tailed)
Housing insecurities					
Male	107	2.07	0.90	-0.49	.623
Female	100	2.13	0.98		
Transportation issues					
Male	102	2.02	0.84	-2.09	.038*
Female	95	2.29	0.99		
Relationship issues					
Male	69	2.29	0.97	0.50	.618
Female	73	2.85	0.89		
Employment pressures					
Male	67	2.54	0.88	-0.21	.831
Female	68	2.57	1.08		
Health issues					
Male	62	2.48	1.02	-2.29	.024*
Female	71	2.87	0.94		
Food insecurities					
Male	38	2.42	1.00	-1.04	.303
Female	30	2.67	0.92		
Legal concerns					
Male	34	2.41	1.02	-1.29	.203
Female	18	2.78	0.88		

Note. * $p < .05$. Sample sizes reflect only respondents who have experienced that stressor.

outreach efforts and psychoeducational groups for this student population.

Methods

Data were derived from the Community College Success Measure (CCSM), an institutional needs assessment tool with 34 block questions employed to investigate factors impacting the success of historically underserved students in community colleges. The CCSM was used because of the range of stress measures collected in the instrument and allowed for the examination of associated stress levels specifically for students from Southeast Asian ethnic backgrounds by gender. The CCSM is administered to randomly selected course sections at participating community colleges. Data for the current investigation were drawn from 12 community colleges primarily from the western region of the United States that participated in the paper based CCSM from 2015 to 2018. While over 13,000 students completed the survey, the analytic sample for this study was delimited to include only students who identified ethnically as Southeast Asian. As such, this study employed responses from 605 Southeast Asian students: Cambodian ($n = 72$, 11.9%), Hmong ($n = 262$, 43.4%), Laotian ($n = 39$, 6.4%), Vietnamese ($n = 129$, 21.3%), and Other Southeast Asian ($n = 103$, 17.0%). The sample included 256 male (42.3%), 293 female (48.4%), 2 trans* (0.3%), and 6 nonconforming (1.0%) students.

The current study employed seven stress measures from the CCSM: (1) housing insecurity, (2) food insecurity, (3) transportation issues, (4) legal concerns, (5) relationship challenges, (6) employment pressures, and (7) health issues. Respondents were asked if they have experienced each type of stressor in the past two years. Dichotomous responses were coded 0 (*No*) and 1 (*Yes*). Respondents were also asked to indicate the level of stress associated with each stress they experienced. Level of stress responses were coded on a 4-

point Likert-type scale from 1 (*Not Stressful*), 2 (*Somewhat Stressful*), 3 (*Stressful*), and 4 (*Very Stressful*).

Descriptive analyses were performed on all stress variables. Independent samples *t* tests were conducted to examine any statistically significant gender differences. Responses from students who identified as trans* and nonconforming were excluded from analyses due to small sample sizes. All analyses were conducted using the IBM SPSS 24 statistical package and assessed using $p < .05$.

Results

More than a third of all students reported that they have experienced transportation issues ($n = 216$, 35.7%) and housing insecurities ($n = 227$, 37.5%). Approximately a quarter of them have experienced health issues ($n = 143$, 23.6%), employment pressures ($n = 149$, 24.6%), and relationship issues ($n = 154$, 25.5%). A lower percentage of all students experienced legal concerns ($n = 60$, 9.9%) and food insecurities ($n = 76$, 12.6%).

By gender, a higher percentage of male students reported having experienced legal concerns ($n = 34$, 65.4%), food insecurities ($n = 38$, 55.9%), transportation issues ($n = 102$, 51.8%), and housing insecurities ($n = 107$, 51.7%). An equal number of male ($n = 67$, 49.6%) and female ($n = 68$, 50.4%) students have experienced employment pressures. There were a slightly higher percentage of female students who reported having experienced health issues ($n = 71$, 53.4%) and relationship challenges ($n = 73$, 51.4%) in comparison to male students.

As shown in Table 1, there were no significant gender differences in stress levels for experiences with food and housing insecurities, legal concerns, relationship challenges, and employment pressures while stress levels significantly differed by gender for transportation and health issues. Female students ($M = 2.92$, $SD = .99$) reported significantly higher levels of stress associated with transportation issues in comparison to their male counterparts ($M = 2.02$, $SD = .84$), $t(-2.09) = 185.48$, $p < .05$. Similarly, female students ($M = 2.87$, $SD = .94$) also reported significantly higher levels of stress associated with health issues in comparison to male students ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.02$), $t(-2.29) = 125.08$, $p < .05$.

Comment

The purpose of the current study was to investigate sources of stress among SEAA college students and gender differences in levels of stress across stressors they experienced. Findings suggested that SEAA college students have experienced food and housing insecurities, health and transportation issues, legal concerns, relationship challenges, and employment pressures. These findings provide further support to previous research on common sources of stress among college students in general²⁻⁵ and specifically for Southeast Asian students.¹⁰⁻¹³ However, what this study adds to the current literature are the different sources of stress that may be more prevalent among SEAA college students. Indeed, more than 35% of students in this study

reported transportation issues and housing insecurities as sources of stress in comparison to other stressors examined. This study provides initial evidence that their basic needs are a primary concern among SEAA students during college.

Findings from the current study also indicate that there were significant gender differences among stress levels associated with stressor experienced. These findings are consistent with prior research on how stress vary by gender.⁶⁻⁸ Findings from the current study support Pierceall and Keim's⁸ conclusion that female college students associate more stress with the stressors they experienced. In this study, female students reported significantly more stress associated with health and transportation issues. These findings extend current research by providing a more nuanced understanding of the specific stressors and their associated stress levels that are significantly different by gender among SEAA college students. These findings suggest that focused interventions for both male and female students are warranted.

Limitations

There are several limitations that warrant consideration in the interpretation of these findings. First, this study focused on the pan-ethnic experiences of SEAA college students and should not be generalized beyond the ethnic groups included in the current analyses. Second, all participants in the current study were Southeast Asian students from community colleges. Experiences with stress and their associated stress levels may vary across higher educational contexts. Future research should examine differences between students attending community colleges and 4-year universities. Third, the modest sample sizes among each Southeast Asian ethnic group across each stressor and stress levels did not allow for the examination of any significant ethnic differences. Future quantitative studies should obtain a larger sample size and examine for statistically significant differences by ethnicity. Finally, the current investigation was a secondary analysis of data from the CCSM and was limited to the stress variables collected in the instrument. The utility of these items in addressing the array of cultural and ethnic specific stressors for students from Southeast Asian ethnic backgrounds are unclear. In addition to the stressors included in this study, future qualitative studies could provide a more nuanced understanding of the different types of stressors experience by SEAA college students. Despite these limitations, the current study has provided initial insights into the experiences of this student population with different stressors and how their associated stress levels vary by gender.

Conclusion

This study draws attention to the specific needs of SEAA college students regarding stress. Findings from the current investigation contributed to our current understanding of the different sources of stress experienced by Southeast Asian students. College health professionals may use this information to engage in targeted outreach efforts for this student population. For example, student affairs personnel

and counseling center staff should ensure that SEAA students are aware of resources and know how to access services to address their specific stressors. More importantly, it is critical that SEAA students know who to contact for these resources. Such efforts could include conducting outreach presentations during Southeast Asian ethnic-based student organization meetings, activities, and events. The proactive engagement of college health professionals in campus spaces and programming that this student population may be more likely to congregate can communicate commitment and investment to addressing their needs. These efforts can provide an opportunity to directly connect with Southeast Asian students. This personal connection may encourage greater use of the counseling center, other on-campus services, and community resources among Southeast Asian students to address their basic needs and other stressors.

In addition, findings from this study highlight the need for college health professionals to be attentive to how experiences with different stressors and their associated stress levels vary by gender for Southeast Asian students. Student affairs personnel could use this understanding to collaborate with the counseling center staff to offer psychoeducational groups that provide tools and techniques in addressing the unique stressors of each gender group. While mixed gender psychoeducational groups can help to address stressors common across gender groups such as employment pressures, separate psychoeducational groups may allow for more focused intervention for male and female students. As identified in this study, for example, psychoeducational groups for female students may include targeted interventions regarding transportation and health issues and relationship challenges while topics related to food and housing insecurities and legal concerns for male students. For psychoeducational groups to be effective, college health professionals must ensure that the tools and techniques offered are culturally relevant to Southeast Asian students in general and culturally appropriate for specific genders.

Conflict of interest disclosure

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report. The authors confirm that the research presented in this article met the ethical guidelines, including adherence to the legal requirements, of the United States of America and received approval from the Institution Review Board of San Diego State University

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