

# First Year Experience Study

## Study Partners

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## Study Goals

To better understand our students' aspirations, challenges, and needs as they transition into college life

To assess how our students change over the first year of college, how change impacts student well-being and performance, and how university programs can best support students.

## Study Questions

- ↘ Before they arrive on campus, what do our incoming students expect from their college experience and what is the status of their mental/emotional/social well-being?
- ↘ How do students' aspirations, social, academic, and psychological well-being change across the first year?
- ↘ How does change on these dimensions impact student performance and well-being, and are there specific domains in which UConn can intervene to promote more positive outcomes?
- ↘ How do First Year Programs interact with or influence student change on these dimensions, and what aspects of these programs are most/least helpful?

## Today's Focus

- ↘ Experiences of the first year student
- ↘ Mental health and Adjustment
  - Traumatic experiences
  - Changes in Depression/Anxiety/Stress
- ↘ Changes in Personal Resources
  - Constructive thinking

## Study Design

- ↘ Incoming first-year students were contacted via email and asked to fill out the web-based survey before they arrived (Time 1)
- ↘ At the end of the first year, students were contacted again and asked to fill out the survey again (Time 2)

## Ongoing Project

Two cohorts so far:

2006-2007

2007-2008

## Cohort 1: 2006-2007 Sample

Time 1

916 students began the survey  
353 women and 184 men completed the entire survey at Time 1

Time 2

250 students provided enough data to be usefully analyzed to assess change

## Trauma Exposure

- Prior to coming to UConn,
  - 82% of students had experienced at least one (potentially) traumatic event
  - Average number of exposures = 5.7
  - Most common:
    - Sudden/unexpected death of loved one (52%)
    - Life-threatening/permanently disabling illness of a loved one (39%)
    - Natural disaster (52%)
    - Motor vehicle or other serious accident (24%)
    - Witnessed family violence (13%)
    - Stalked (13%)
    - Sexual abuse ages 13-17 (9%)

## Trauma Exposure

- Since coming to UConn,
  - 45% of students had experienced at least one (potentially) traumatic event
  - Most common:
    - Sudden/unexpected death of loved one (20%)
    - Life-threatening/permanently disabling illness of a loved one (13%)
    - Motor vehicle or other serious accident (9%)
    - Stalked (7%)
    - Sexual abuse (age 18+) (5%)

## Trauma Exposure

- Since coming to UConn (cont.),
  - Other trauma exposures:
    - Robbed/present when others robbed, with weapon (2%)
    - Life-threatening illness of self (3%)
    - Physical assault by a stranger (2%)
    - Threatened with death/physical harm (3%)
    - Present when others assaulted by a stranger (2%)
    - Intimate partner abuse (2%)

## DASS-21 (Depression, Anxiety, Stress) Student Scores

	Depression		Anxiety		Stress	
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2
Normal	74%	67%	75%	71%	79%	76%
Mild	8%	14%	9%	10%	8%	6%
Moderate	12%	7%	6%	6%	8%	8%
Severe	4%	7%	5%	3%	4%	8%
Extremely Severe	2%	5%	5%	10%	1%	2%

## Changes in Constructive Thinking

- Constructive thinking = a dispositional adaptive approach to coping with stressful circumstances
- Many students increased, but many declined, so no overall change for the sample as a whole
- Regression analyses: controlling for initial levels of adjustment, change in constructive thinking predicted adjustment (depression, anxiety, social adjustment) at the end of the first year.
- In addition, change in constructive thinking predicted first year grade point average controlling for SAT scores.
- Further, *change* in constructive thinking was a far more potent predictor of adjustment and grades than initial level of constructive thinking.
- These results highlight the importance of examining the role of psychosocial resources in a developmental context.

## Innovation of this FYE Study

- Multiple domains
- Representation of multiple perspectives
- Large sample size
- Opportunity to look at *individual* level data
- Inclusion of identifiers allows linking of data
- Ability to build powerful predictive models
- Over multiple years, identify change and trends

## Next steps...

- Currently planning survey of incoming 2009-2010 first year students
  - Need larger sample size
  - Strategies for recruitment/retention
- Partnership with other stakeholders?
- Implications for programming