Brief Report

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Commuter Students and Psychological Sense of Community: How Ties to Home Relate to Academic Success

Abstract: Universities spend significant time and energy establishing a sense of community for their students. University personnel strive to increase school community ties for commuter students who travel back and forth from home to campus under the assumption that these increased ties will predict academic success. In an effort to understand those variables related to commuter student success, 335 participants responded to questions regarding commuter status, psychological sense of community with one's school, psychological sense of community with one's hometown, and academic self-handicapping. Results indicated that those with a strong sense of community with their hometown were less likely to engage in academic self-handicapping. Moreover, this relationship was moderated by commuting status, such that the effect was stronger for commuter students than for non-commuter students. Implications for commuter student success and future research are discussed.

Keywords: commuter students, psychological sense of community, academic self-handicapping

The traditional college experience involves moving away from home and into a residence hall on campus, living away from home and family for perhaps the first time. However, data collected for the 2015–2016 academic year indicated that only 24.8% of students enrolled in a 4-year college or university resided on campus (NPSAS: 16; U.S. Department of Education). Students who drive to campus are termed “commuter students.” Commuter students are often assumed to be at a higher risk for academic difficulties because they miss important aspects of campus engagement (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007; Thomas, 2019). Thus, many university administrations have started to provide more targeted support and engagement opportunities for these students (Horn & Nevill, 2006; Simpson & Burnett, 2019). These efforts are motivated by a belief that strengthening a commuter student’s tie to the university will result in academic success.

However, commuter students are frequently unable to take advantage of these targeted opportunities because of their life demands. Previous research (Jacoby & Garland, 2004; Jacoby, 2002) points to multiple life roles being a factor in commuter student success. Of the 75.2% of students who commuted to campus at 4-year universities in the 2015–2016 academic year, 22.2% lived off campus with their parents (U.S. Department of Education). For many commuter students who live at home, being a student is only one of several important roles they hold. Whether living with parents or in their own household, commuter students may have less time and fewer opportunities to engage in the college community. For example, a commuter student who must be available to pick up children from soccer practice or who has a job off campus may not be able to attend that evening seminar at school designed to help their study habits or the weekend football game that would strengthen their university identity.

Simpson and Burnett (2019) found that student collegiate engagement results from the time and energy students commit to academic activities. Thus, commuter students may have a more challenging time academically, socially, and institutionally due to their more limited time on campus compared to noncommuter students. Validating these concerns, some research findings show that commuter students experience less social integration with their peers and participate in fewer extracurricular activities (Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022). Indeed, commuter students may have less engagement in social activities at their institutions, and lower levels of success in higher education generally (Thomas, 2019). Unfortunately, given the commuter student’s situation, they are unable to

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take part in some of the programs created to increase campus engagement such as living learning communities (LLC). These learning communities are meant to provide students with a clear means to create a community on campus, connect with peers and integrate within their major. Indeed, research shows that LLCs can improve academic outcomes (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). A commuter student, however, would not be eligible to take part in such a program.

The lack of ability to connect on campus or participate in campus-related activities is not the only barrier commuter students’ face that may hinder their academic success. They are also spending time in a home environment that may or may not be supportive. Parker and colleagues (2023) found that reduced relational–emotional support at home was related to increased distress particularly for low income and female students. In a qualitative study of ten minority commuter students, Burke and Park-Taylor (2022) found that many of the students described a decrease in family connectedness as their relationships with families became strained with schedule conflicts and decreased quality time. They also expressed a desire to engage with college students in their home communities and find mental health resources. These findings suggest that the commuter students most at risk for negative outcomes may be those with weak home relationships. However, just as negative home relationships may be related to poor performance, experiencing positive and uplifting connections at home may serve a protective function. Indeed, commuter students who report positive family functioning tend to report lower levels of stress and use more proactive coping strategies (Gefen & Fish, 2013). Therefore, students who receive support from their home communities may be buffered against the lack of institutional support they might experience. In contrast, residential college students may be distanced from their previous group of friends, family, and broader social network resulting in increased homesickness (Fisher, Murray, & Frazer, 1985). Commuter students would not face this challenge to the same extent. While many research studies find commuter students to be at risk for academic failures (Kuh et al., 2007; Thomas, 2019), others have found that commuter students have higher GPAs than non-commuter students (Simpson & Burnett, 2019). Students who have both strong connections to their home and high levels of emotional support benefit from the commuter student lifestyle.

For both on campus and commuter students then, it seems that community is important. The original concept of community (Sarason, 1977) can be thought of as people’s acknowledgment that they are members of an overarching group of interdependent individuals. Obst, Smith, and Zinkiewicz (2002) provide a conceptual framework for psychological sense of community (PSoC) that incorporates not only geographic boundaries of communities but also the ingroup identification dimension of social identity theory (Hogg, 1992). Thus, PSoC relates to both one’s interdependence with a group and also one’s identification with that group. The extent to which commuter students perceive community with their university and with their hometown should ultimately impact their academic success.

One variable that might prove valuable in understanding student success is academic self-handicapping. Academic self-handicapping involves using maladaptive study/work habits (such as procrastinating on a paper or going to a concert the night before a big exam) to insulate oneself from the personal consequences of failure; the student can blame the maladaptive habit rather than their own lack of ability. The extent to which students engage in academic self-handicapping influences academic achievement (Schwinger, Wirthwein, Lemmer, & Steinmayr, 2014). A commuter student who has many demands on their time may feel as though they will have difficulty getting schoolwork done. Therefore, they can avoid that feeling of personal failure by turning to academic self-handicapping behaviors.

In this preliminary study on commuter status and psychological sense of community, we assessed how one’s psychological sense of community for one’s hometown (PSoCH) and for one’s university (PSoCU) impact student success variables such as academic self-handicapping. Our hypotheses sought to confirm the relationship between student community status, community identification, and student outcomes. We hypothesized that there would be a three-way interaction between PSoCH, PSoCU, and Commuter Status. We anticipated that commuter students who felt a strong PSoCU but a weak PSoCH would feel conflict from not living in the community in which they felt the most connected, the university, resulting in greater levels of academic self-handicapping. Similarly, we hypothesized that non-commuter students who felt a strong PSoCH but a weak PSoCU would feel conflict from not living in the community in which they felt the most connected, their hometowns, resulting in greater levels of academic self-handicapping.

1 Method

1.1 Participants

Female (n = 220) and male (n = 113) students [GPowerv (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) indicates that 166 participants are needed to detect a moderate effect] participated in
exchange for course credit in their face-to-face Introductory Psychology courses at a regional university. The average age was 19.68 (SD = 4.00; ranging from 17 to 56). One hundred and four participants indicated that they commuted to school and 231 were not commuter students. Our participants were diverse including African American/Black (34%), European American/White (34%), Native American/American Indian (12%), Hispanic/Latino (7%), Asian/Pacific Islander (1%), Biracial (9%), and three participants who did not indicate ethnicity.

1.2 Procedure and Measures

Participants were recruited through the SONA system and completed the measures through Qualtrics in exchange for course credit. After consenting to participate, Introduction to Psychology students answered basic demographics (age, sex, classification, commuter status) and questionnaires regarding community membership and academic self-handicapping.

We measured both sense of community with one’s hometown (PSoCH) and with participant’s university (PSoCU) using modified questions from Obst et al. (2002). Specifically, all questions from the factor identified at “Ties and Friendship” were modified to read “hometown” instead of “local neighborhood” (α = 0.97) and “(university name)” instead of “local neighborhood” (α = 0.95). Participants responded to each statement on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 7 indicating strongly agree. Average scores were used.

Academic self-handicapping (α = 0.84) was measured using the Academic Self-Handicapping Strategies scale from Midgley et al. (2000). All six items were included and averaged for a single score. For each strategy, participants indicated how true each item was of their own behavior on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 indicating not true at all and 5 indicating very true.

2 Results

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 25. The proposed three-way interaction (PSoCU × PSoCH × Commuter Status) was tested using the PROCESS macro (Model 3) developed by Hayes (2018) for SPSS. All participants were included in the analyses. All variables were centered prior to analysis. As we wanted to control for student age and sex, they were used as covariates in the model. The overall model was significant $F(9, 320) = 2.16, \Delta R^2 = 0.057, p = 0.025$ (Table 1). Our proposed three-way interaction between PSoCU × PSoCH × Commuter Status was not significant. However, there was a significant main effect of PSoCH ($p = 0.007$) showing that those who had a stronger sense of community with their hometown were less likely to use academic self-handicapping. This main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between PSoCH and Commuter Status ($p = 0.010$). The conditional effects revealed that for commuter students, having less community with one’s hometown was related to more academic self-handicapping ($t = -2.68, p = 0.008$). Being less tied to home led to more academic self-handicapping for commuter students than for non-commuter students ($t = -2.43, p = 0.016$) (Figure 1).

3 Discussion

The data did not support the hypothesized three-way interaction between PSoCU, PSoCH, and Commuter status; non-commuter students engaged in the same amount of academic self-handicapping regardless of their PSoCH or PSoCU. It is possible that students who live on campus, even if they do not feel particularly connected to the university community, may have a local group to which they feel a connection. Rather than feeling connected to the broader campus community, participants may feel connect to a smaller friend group, or a club. Our results also suggest that feeling more connected to the campus does not necessarily result in improvements in

<table>
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<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Model R²</th>
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Note: *p < 0.05.
students’ ability to avoid negative behaviors like academic self-handicapping. First-year students (which make up the bulk of our participants) often experience a wide range of problems including homesickness, depression, absent-mindedness, and a drop in academic grades (Buote et al., 2007). Though feeling a sense of community with one’s university is important and beneficial in other areas, as the LLC literature shows (Brower & Inkelas, 2010), perhaps it does not inoculate students from self-defeating behaviors such as academic self-handicapping.

Our commuter students who had moderate to high levels of PSoCH had similar levels of academic self-handicapping to the noncommuter students. This subset of commuter students are living at home, and they have a sense of community with their hometown; they are living where they are connected. It is important to note that when commuter students are connected to their home community, they do not engage in more academic defeating behavior than if they had lived on campus. Instead of the daily demands of living at home leading to divided attention and decreased student adjustment as suggested by researchers (Kuh et al., 2007), the positive connection to one’s hometown may allow the student to engage in a similar amount of healthy academic behaviors as if they were living on campus.

Our most interesting finding, however, was that commuter students with low levels of PSoCH engaged in significantly more academic self-handicapping than noncommuter students with low levels of PSoCH. These students are living in an environment where they do not feel connected, and it impacts their academic success. Jacoby and Garland (2004) noted that if students do not feel supported by their community, they may face additional stressors and need additional support. We would theorize that the lack of PSoCH may be an indicator of lack of home support. Thus, if students lack support and are facing stress from home, while also facing the challenges of their first years at a university, they may be more motivated to engage in academic self-handicapping. By engaging in academic self-handicapping, these students are using a proactive strategy that allows them to externalize their failures and protect their ego (Beck et al. 2000; Thomas & Gadhois, 2007). These students are likely being pulled in many directions and are engaging in academic self-handicapping out of fear and a sense of self-protection.

A primary limitation of the study was the lack of performance-based outcomes. Although our study focused on academic self-handicapping, it would have been beneficial to know if PSoCH was related to outcomes such as GPA. Although we attempted to measure GPA in this study, many of our students were first-semester freshmen who did not yet have GPA to report. Future research may consider utilizing a longitudinal study design to assess academic outcomes of commuter students throughout their college career. It is possible that connections to home and university have predictable fluctuations as students adjust; and perhaps connections to the university may become more important for commuter students over time. Another limitation of this study is the inability to know whether lack of a psychological sense of community with one’s environment means that environment is perceived negatively. It would be beneficial to know participants’ opinions about their homes, their perceptions of conflict, and fears about academic success. Assessing possible mediators to explain the relationship between PSoCH and academic self-handicapping for commuter students would shed light on what is driving this relationship. Future studies should focus on

Figure 1: Interaction between psychological sense of community with one’s hometown and commuter status on academic self-handicapping.
Commuter students’ connections to home and under what conditions those connections predict academic success. Commuter students who do not feel a sense of connection to their home communities are particularly vulnerable to academic self-handicapping. These students may be under more stress and feel more of an academic burden as a result of this lack of connection. Although universities tend to focus on increasing students’ ties to the university community, there was no significant relationship between PSOUC and academic self-handicapping. Therefore, feeling more connected to the university community did not relate to less academic self-handicapping as predicted. Rather, students’ connections to their home environments, particularly for commuter students, seemed to be more impactful. This article provides an interesting contrast to other work in the area of commuter students. Research is clear that being a commuter student leads to increased risk of psychological distress (Parker, Yacoub, Mughal, & Mamari, 2023), lowered academic success (Ishitani & Reid, 2015), and lower levels of belongingness to the campus (Stalmirská & Mellon, 2022). However, our study suggests that for some students, living at home may be the right choice. Our study supports the work of Burke and Park-Taylor (2022) that suggests the quality of the home environment is crucial to commuter student success; these students may need additional support services in order to achieve in an academic environment.

Funding information: This work was not funded.

Author contributions: Author roles were as follows: Brian T. Smith – analysis/interpretation of data, writing, and revising article for content; Kelly Charlton – conception, design, collection of data, writing, and revising article for content; Ashley Batts Allen-analysis/interpretation of data, revising article for content. We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Conflict of interest: Authors state no conflict of interest. All research was approved by the UNCP IRB (#10-2018-001-KC).

Data availability statement: The datasets generated during and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

References


