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The Shifting Contexts of College Students' Lives

News reports and articles about the stress of college life reflect a growing concern that college students are a vulnerable population, residing in high stress environments, susceptible to social and emotional risks, and often unable or unwilling to access adequate support. The National Center for Education Statistics shows an overall increase in college enrollment at both undergraduate and graduate levels in the last four decades (NCES, 2014). As more young adults choose higher education, college campuses are under increased public scrutiny. They are expected, on the one hand, to offer the safety and guidance associated with their *in loco parentis* role and, simultaneously, to provide a climate of exploration and freedom in order to give young adults opportunities to take on the new roles and responsibilities of adulthood. In the wake of a series of high profile campus shootings, sexual assault, and suicides, colleges and universities are focusing on prevention, awareness, and student mental health services like never before and college counseling centers are working to stay attuned to students' needs.[1]

Hicks and Miller (2006) found that college students must work hard to adjust to changing relationships with family and friends back home, make meaningful social connections in their new environments, and deal with the stress of being in an unfamiliar place. As the college-going population grows in numbers, the severity and prevalence of mental health issues among college students also continues to rise (Cook, 2007). Across all populations and higher education settings, researchers have found significant stress and feelings of loneliness and isolation on college campuses (Dellinger-Ness & Handler, 2007).

In this article, we examine the concerns of young adults as they transition to college or graduate school, and we outline some of the key issues facing college counseling centers. We present these issues from a developmental and cultural point of view, drawing from the lived experiences of students. Our findings are part of the Lives in Transition Project, a multi-year research project examining the contexts and conditions that lead to successful or difficult transitions for adolescents and young adults. The

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[1] In this article, we discuss the experiences of undergraduate and graduate students, ages 18-25. We intend the term "college" to mean colleges *and* universities but we generally use "college" for the sake of brevity.

current study focuses on the narratives of twenty-one graduate students who were asked to reflect upon the economic, practical, social, emotional, and cultural demands they faced between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. Our research considers the central concerns of campus life, especially, retention and success in school, intimate relationships, cross-cultural adjustments, and stress related to depression or anxiety. We argue that there is a need to re-think college counseling in order to provide support that is insight-oriented, developmental, relational, and culturally informed.

We three authors reflect age, culture, and ethnic diversity. The lead author is an Associate Professor in a graduate program in counseling and psychology and has worked with adolescents and young adults for forty years. The second and third authors are graduate students in counseling and psychology, who worked as research assistants on this project and have a particular interest in college counseling.

Our work contextualizes the experience of college students within four areas: 1) the developmental landscape of young adults; 2) the challenges of transition to adulthood and circumstances posed by race, class, gender, and sexual orientation; 3) social-emotional well-being and the young person's inclination to move toward hopefulness and resilience, and 4) the unique and shifting role of college counseling centers to meet students' needs. We use a somewhat personal tone because we want this article to be accessible and relevant and we want our research and writing to invest in creating contexts that nurture wellness during early adulthood. In the following sections, we first review the developmental literature on emerging adulthood and the literature relevant to student mental health concerns across diverse populations. We then discuss our research purpose, data collection, and process of analysis. A report of our findings follows, highlighting the most salient themes that emerge from our narrative analysis. We conclude with implications for college counseling practices.

Developmental Landscape of College-Age Students

The theoretical frameworks of Arnett (2000), Bronfenbrenner (1981), Erikson (1968), Gilligan (1993), and Marcia (1966) helped us to understand and further explain students' experiences. Using Erikson's developmental theory, the college-going period bridges two stages: Identity vs. Role Confusion

(12-18 years old) and Intimacy vs. Isolation (19-40 years old). The hallmark of identity development in early adulthood is the challenge of discerning one's own needs, reconciling those needs with the needs of intimate others, and taking on more challenging and complex roles and responsibilities in the larger society (Erikson, 1968). Confusion and distress can ensue, perhaps especially for girls and women, when the task of differentiating one's own needs from the needs of others becomes overwhelming due to societal ideals that women should make themselves available to meet the needs of others (Gilligan, 1993). Erikson proposed the idea of a "psychosocial moratorium" to allow individuals the opportunity and time to explore who they are and who they are becoming with fewer role expectations and obligations.

Marcia (1966) described this period as a time of both crisis and opportunity, when young people begin to evaluate their experiences, choices, beliefs, and ideals from a more independent lens, which often leads toward exploring alternatives. As they gain self-assurance, they make commitments toward new aspirations, values, and relationships, which, in turn, contribute to their continuing identity development. Arnett (2000) devised the term "emerging adulthood" and elaborated on the unique challenges of this developmental period when the person is neither an adolescent nor an adult. Like Erikson and Marcia, Arnett defended the importance of a "self-focus" period (Arnett, 2007). Importantly, Arnett (2000, 2015) cautioned that emerging adults, who have the time and resources to engage in an exploratory period and defer their adult roles, are more likely to come from economically advantageous backgrounds. Factors such as gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, culture, religion, and socioeconomic status (SES), all play an important role in shaping the experiences that become the foundation upon which young people construct a sense of themselves and the world around them. One Asian American student in our study, for example, lived with and had responsibilities for his grandmother during graduate school. Another student from Saudi Arabia took on a parenting role with her younger brother after her father died when she was a teenager. Research on this topic, and policy and practice recommendations that arise from this research, must be mindful of contextual and individual differences.

Bronfenbrenner's (1981) ecological model of development explains how environmental and cultural factors affect development and how the successive transitions in role and setting influence development

throughout life. Bronfenbrenner's notion of ecological transitions conceptualizes development as a process that involves increasingly complex changes in activity, role, place, and relationships. Examples in early adulthood include, getting or losing a job, entering or ending a relationship, leaving home to go to college, and changing residence.

<div align="center">Challenges of Transition for College-Aged Students</div>

Transitioning from high school to the years immediately after high school is seen as one of the most stressful times in the life span, marked by social, emotional, and economic uncertainty. Frey, Tobin, and Beesley (2004) identified significant stressors, such as, managing academic demands, the separation from family and friends, and the challenges of establishing new relationships in the university community. Healthy *and* risky experimentation is typical. For example, there is an increase in alcohol use, marijuana use, and sex with multiple partners at this time of life (Fromme, Corbin, & Kruse, 2008).

An important concern of colleges is student retention and research confirms that a lack of support during difficult times increases the risk for dropping out (Kelly, LaVergne, Boone, & Boone, 2012; O'Keeffe, 2013). Blanco et al. (2008) suggested that college students may have less well-developed coping mechanisms and less life experience with romantic disappointments and interpersonal upsets, thus making them more vulnerable to these common stressors. Similarly, a study by Dellinger-Ness and Handler (2007) discovered that the lack of social support could lead to maladaptive coping mechanisms such as self-injurious behavior and drug and alcohol use.

The type, prevalence, and magnitude of stress encountered by young adults vary across gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, social class, and geographic location. For example, Frey, Tobin, and Beesley (2004) found that peer relationships affect women more significantly than men and positive relationships within the college community predict less psychological distress for female students. Sexual minority students are among one of the highest risk populations in college. A study by McAleavey, Castonguay, and Locke (2011) found that sexual minority students are more likely than heterosexual students to seek college counseling services, perhaps reflecting greater levels of distress in sexual minority groups. These authors also pointed out that sexual minority students have significantly

more family-related distress and lower levels of family support than sexual majority students. Furrow

(2012) noted that lesbian, gay bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students can face psychological violence

and unsafe classroom and living environments.

Cultural, ethnic, religious and racial backgrounds matter and students encounter different sets of

problems during the transition to college (Barry & Nelson, 2005; Christopher & Skillman, 2009; Sánchez,

Esparza, Colón, & Davis, 2010; Kelly et al., 2012). Christopher and Skillman (2009) wrote that, "Ethnic

minority students may experience heightened distress as a result of experiences with racial discrimination,

difficulty adapting to a predominantly white college culture, and community disengagement" (p. 44). For

example, Latino students may face several barriers for college success, such as, low socio-economic

status (SES), lack of resources, and limited connection to the college environment (Venegas & Hallett,

2013). International students often encounter problems with language and differences in expected social

norms during the transition period Olivas and Li (2006). Resnick (2006) underscored the idea that mental

health issues can be even more isolating for minority students on mostly white campuses. Furthermore,

research by Hayes et al. (2012) found that counseling centers on campuses that did not have a diverse

staff had much lower rates of minority students making appointments to see counselors.

Socio-economic status (SES) has a pronounced effect on the transition to adulthood. Sánchez et al.

(2010) showed that although family aspirations motivated some students to attend college, family

obligations, coupled with financial need, placed low-income young people at risk for postponing,

discontinuing, or not attending college at all. Findings from multiple studies have found that a lack of

family resources contribute to delaying or ending higher education among ethnically diverse youths

(Mollenkopf, Waters, Holdaway, & Kasinitz, 2005). First generation college-going students face

particular challenges. Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, and Durón (2013) found that this group,

especially first generation women, reported less social support, more single-event traumatic stress, less

life satisfaction, and marginally more depression symptomatology than non-first-generation students.

Students from low SES backgrounds often have greater family responsibility, more financial stress, and

are more likely to work while in school, making it more difficult to complete college (Fuligni and Witkow, 2004).

Given these realities, along with enormous increases in the cost of higher education, it is not surprising that there is a growing gap between high and low-income students when it comes to enrolling and staying in school to earn a four-year degree, and that gap is the same, regardless of students' SAT scores. Eighty-two percent (82%) of students in the top income quartile with high SAT scores earn a four-year degree by age twenty-four compared to 44% of students in the bottom income quartile (See the 2014 White House Report, *Increasing College Opportunity for Low-Income Students*, for a full discussion on this topic).

Mental Health of College-Aged Students

The studies described above paint a picture of the external stressors encountered in college students' lives. These stressors, along with the young person's own questioning about who they are and what they wish for themselves, exist within an intricate web of responsibilities and demands. In early adulthood, mental illness becomes a salient concern; there is a need to alleviate the immediate suffering in the person's life and, also, to foster insightful awareness. Mental health issues in early adulthood tend to have repercussions for decades (Fromme et al., 2008; Blanco et al., 2008; Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2013; Castillo & Schwartz, 2013); therefore, effective interventions can provide both immediate and long-term benefits.

A longitudinal study by Zivin, Eisenberg, Gollust, and Golberstein (2009) found that approximately 33% of college students had a mental health problem at baseline and that these problems continued for 60% of the identified students over the next two years. Furthermore, a study by Blanco et al. (2008) found that almost half of college-aged individuals had a psychiatric disorder in the previous year but most of them did not seek treatment, particularly those who had alcohol and drug abuse disorders. The implication of these studies is that there is a substantial unmet need for the proper treatment of students with mental health issues (Blanco et al., 2008; Cranford, Eisenberg, & Serras, 2009).

The American College Health Association conducted the 2010 National College Health Assessment survey with 30,000 students across thirty-nine campuses and discovered that 28.4% of students reported that they felt so depressed at some point in college that they were unable to function (Castillo & Schwartz, 2013). Among students with co-occurring frequent binge drinking and mental health problems, 67% perceived a need for mental health services but only 38% received services in the previous year (Cranford et al., 2009). These studies highlight the urgent need for educators and clinicians to actively reach out to students with mental health issues, especially considering that stigma and addiction continue to be a barrier for some students (Blanco et al., 2008).

<div align="center">The Unique Context of College Counseling Centers</div>

The Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors recently presented results from a study of the concerns of college students coming to college counseling centers from 2008-2013. They found that anxiety problems have grown by nearly 30% and depression by about 10% since 2008 (Novotney, 2014). The study also noted a lack of process and outcome research on how college counseling centers are utilized by students, the specific needs of populations that are under-served, and the effectiveness of college counseling interventions.

College counselors, unlike most community-based counselors, struggle with multiple roles and responsibilities within their colleges, making appropriate boundaries with students as clients challenging (Hsu, 2011; Rosenberger, 2011). In a climate of budget cuts, college counselors often must actively advocate to maintain counseling as a free and accessible student service (Bigard, 2009). Additionally, college campuses are culturally unique, dynamic, and rapidly changing environments, requiring quick adjustments to meet the demands each new generation of students brings with them (Bishop, 2006). An ever-present challenge is the imbalance between student demand and available counselors who can appropriately meet their needs (Hardy, Weatherford, Locke, DePalma, & D'Iuso, 2011).

College counseling centers must be willing to constantly re-make themselves as students' needs and treatment practices change and, importantly, they must be creative and innovative in their outreach

strategies, in order to make counseling accessible to students that are struggling but less likely to initiate counseling (Schwitzer, 2009). Research by Constantine (2002) found that counseling access and success are strengthened for racial and ethnic minority students when counseling centers increase their reach using innovative methods, such as peer outreach, to reduce stigma and reinforce positive attitudes toward counseling. Our study affirms Rosenberger's (2011) college counseling priorities: identity development, personal insight, and interpersonal success. With further evaluation and research, college counseling centers can become more directly relevant and effective in meeting the short and long-term objectives of students as they deal with distress and pain and, also, in their quest for personal growth and well-being.

Research Design and Description of Informants

Students in a Theories of Counseling and Psychotherapy course were asked to write about a "process of change" they experienced between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. They wrote with depth, insight, and authenticity about navigating difficult intimate relationships, trying to change a behavior pattern that was causing them stress, making autonomous decisions for the first time in their lives, trying to maintain family connections from a distance, and the economic and academic stressors of school. When we asked if students would be willing to give their consent to use their paper for this research project, the response was overwhelmingly positive; twenty-one students wanted their experience to be known and conveyed consent by sending back a response to our informed consent letter by email. In addition to the papers, we asked students to complete an online survey to gather more information in order to contextualize our findings (we asked, for example, about past life stressors, coping strategies, and resources used for support). We also conducted a focus group interview with staff and interns at the college counseling center to gather data to illuminate the issues students are bringing and the therapeutic principles, length of time, and practices in use. This interview, along with twenty-one student papers and eighteen surveys, provide the data for this article.

The location of this study is a university of about 6,000 students located in an urban area in the northeast. Research participants were enrolled in a graduate program aimed toward licensure as a school

and/or community counselor. Our study group included fifteen women and six men, including twelve white women and four white men and one person from each of the following groups: a white woman with an ambulatory disability, an Asian American man, an Arab woman international student, an African American woman, a Latino man, and a Latina woman. The average age of students was 25-years-old, with a range in age from twenty to thirty-two. The majority grew up in a suburban area (65%) with the remaining students' home residences evenly distributed between rural and urban areas. Seventy-five percent (75%) were eligible for financial aid.

When asked, "What is the approximate amount of education loan debt that you alone will have to pay?" twelve out of eighteen reported loans amounting to more than $40K, five will have loans of over $70K, and two will have loans of over $100K. A third of the students reported major family disruption before going to college, including the death of primary caregivers or divorce of parents resulting in major life changes.

Our research mined student papers to illuminate these questions: What social, emotional, and moral concerns characterize the ecological and developmental transitions of young college-going adults? How do young adults think through their own desires and needs within a context of interpersonal, familial, societal, and cultural ideals and demands? What do our findings suggest for college counseling practices? Reflection papers and written responses on the survey were analyzed using narrative analysis (Sorsoli, 2007). Each of the three authors read and coded every paper following a grounded theory, open-coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). We used an iterative process of working toward coding consensus by sharing and discussing our codes and the quotes that substantiated that code.

Findings

Overview of Findings

Arnett (2007, 2015) described five psychosocial features that emerging adults experience: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities (p. 69). There is fluid movement

across these structures, depending on how the person interacts within various contexts. We identified four key themes in the students' narratives: "Push/Pull" of Cultural and Family Ideals; Identity, Image, and the "Other;" Interpersonal Crisis; and Self-Discovery and Resilience. As our analysis progressed, we found it useful to integrate our key themes with the developmental features outlined by Arnett. The narratives illuminated developmentally normative challenges: difficult adjustments, painful intimate relationships, negative body image, loss and grief, financial stress, missing the mark in the attempt to balance intimacy and autonomy, diminishing confidence, and efforts at self-improvement strategies. Several students were dealing with issues that exceeded anticipated developmental challenges, for example, the loss of a parent, debilitating disease, and incapacitating anxiety or depression.

Students wrote with clarity about the personal qualities needed for well-being during difficult transitions, such as, having attainable goals, persistence, honesty, being hopeful, using self-advocacy effectively, motivation, decisiveness, patience, and acceptance. The narratives were explicit about what one "should" do, feel, think, or be in order to manage change well. In fact, the list of personal "shoulds" that appeared in the papers is long. Students were hard on themselves. Feelings of guilt coincided with not possessing these "ideal" qualities. At the same time, students often struggled with "too much of a good thing;" for example, being *too* accepting, *too* averse to failure, or *too* generous. One student's comment was reflected in many of the papers: "Failure is not an option."

It was not surprising to hear a firm belief (and implicit hope) in the importance of "being able to make it on my own;" however, we learned that very often significant others–family members and friends–were not in agreement with, and were not supportive of, the student's quest for change. In reading these narratives there is a distinct sense that many students struggled alone in order to achieve an important goal, such as moving to a different state to attend graduate school. Only half of the students responded that they received "good" or "excellent" support from parents, friends, or non-familial adults.

Students described aiming toward new, self-identified ways of being, believing, and acting, sometimes moving away from past patterns. Every student discussed some aspect of relationship struggle

and the process of coming to terms with being responsible for one's own life in a context of sometimes disapproving cultural, societal, familial, and peer ideals and norms. Internal process was evident in these papers as students attempted to reconcile their desire with the desire of a significant other. For example, the ideal, "families stay close and care for each other," directly collided with the desire of several students to move to a different place. Many students' reflections pivoted around the struggle to negotiate the middle ground between two ends of the spectrum: intimacy vs. autonomy, responsibility vs. freedom, commitment vs. exploration, etc. In the next section we will further elaborate upon these highlights by detailing our findings concerning the most commonly experienced struggle: reconciling the pull of family and cultural ideals with the push toward the individual's life plans and goals.

"Push/Pull" of Cultural and Family Ideals

The "push and pull" of cultural and family ideals alongside the young person's desire to author his or her own life, reverberated across all the narratives. The developmental journey toward intimacy and autonomy was reflected in these narratives as a process of negotiation between the interests of others and self-interests. In a recent collection of articles edited by Waters, Carr, Kefalas, and Holdaway (2011), the complexity of navigating this developmental period is explored in the context of culture, race, ethnicity, and class. One student, a 25-year-old daughter of Haitian parents, poignantly weaves these concepts through her narrative. As an adolescent, Roseline's[2] mother teased her when she wanted to do things like her American peers. "Are you being teenager-America now?" her mother would challenge, drawing a line between cultural identities within and outside the family–a line on which this young woman needed to walk daily. As a graduate student in counseling, Roseline did a lot of soul-searching about her own desire and values as represented in secular vs. religious norms, peer vs. family relationships, self vs. community goals, American vs. Haitian cultural identity. She and other research participants said that there is no one making a space for this type of exploration. Roseline said,

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[2] All names of people and places have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

I feel as though I have a better understanding of what goes on at this age because of the time I take for introspection but I find myself just as confused at times about life expectations of me…and the identity struggle that comes with the transition into a more independent adult. What I want and what my parents want for me in terms of goals and desire: Is it the same, parallel, or opposite?

Others revealed a sense of doubt and guilt when they staked a claim on their own lives leaving family members behind. Twenty-five-year-old Daniel described dealing with "challenges and stresses" he had not encountered before when he decided to move with his fiancé to attend graduate school several states away. Coming from a large German-Catholic family and a close-knit rural community, Daniel said that even though he knew he felt passionate about getting an education in order to work with "people who had severe mental illness," he struggled with his decision to move away. In order to cope, he withdrew from others and tried to "block out" what he was feeling. He revealed the often tender and treacherous process of making a decision that feels "right" but hurtful to others:

As the youngest of six my mother still sees me as her "baby" and it was very difficult to move away and convince her that this was the best decision for me and my career…Emotionally it was very difficult to leave behind everything that I had grown up with and the friends that I had made...For the few months leading up to my move and, even now, I was more emotionally withdrawn from my friends, probably to brace myself from the impact of moving away…I felt like I was not only disrupting my life but also leaving a hole in theirs. My way of thinking was complicated; on one hand I knew that this was the right decision for my future, but on the other hand I knew that it was going to be very difficult in the short term…Even now, a few months after I moved, I still think about what it might have been like if I would have stayed.

Although Daniel knows something important about his own desire (in fact, he uses the assertive phrases, "I know," "I think," "I feel," and "I need" often in his paper) his doubt is palpable. We learned

from the research participants that desire and doubt often go hand-in-hand. As the young person experiences the "push" to act on their own evolving self-knowledge and aspiration, cultural and family ideals factor into their decisions in powerful ways.

Some narratives revealed a deeper sense of guilt, even shame, in trying to reconcile their desire with personal values and ideals. Amber described the emotional confusion she felt in her sexual attraction to a friend while dating someone else. She struggled to "put up boundaries with male friends" and described feeling "selfish" when, in the moment, the pleasure of attraction seemed to trump the religious ideals she held. Her narrative reveals the painful emotions that come when pulled in a direction that feels counter to one's conscience. "My feelings of attraction to my friend overpowered the back of my mind reminding me that it wasn't a good idea," Amber said, and added, "As long as my emotional needs were being met, I didn't have any desire to stop." The moral repercussions she felt caused great turmoil and it was that emotional discomfort that finally led her to stop spending time with male friends one-on-one.

What these stories help us understand is that normative developmental issues can cause a great deal of confusion, self-doubt, and emotional turmoil in the lives of emerging adults. The "push" to act on the hope for something different is strong in young adults. The sense of being defined by the expectations of others and family or cultural traditions presents young people with both crisis and opportunity (Marcia, 1966). These vignettes reveal that, for some young adults, the "right thing to do" was not what their families, or conscience, wanted or expected them to do.

Identity, Image, and the Other

Identity exploration, development, and goal attainment are ongoing and dynamic processes for young adults as they face changes in roles, settings, relationships, and constraints (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966; Bronfenbrenner, 1981). A second theme, "identity, image, and the other," describes the need to explore one's own identity while society, culture, and relationships with others, concurrently influence one's self-perception. Many research participants discussed their struggle with acting in a way that felt authentic, while also responding to some of the expectations and norms that allow them to be successful in new

roles and settings. Kayla described her journey to explore and take risks in search for her identity after college:

> It was the need for my own sense of purpose and independence that overcame me. I felt stuck in my job, suffocated by family, stagnant in my relationship, and uninspired by my surroundings… The biggest obstacle to this personal exploration of mine was the fear of not having the courage to be my own authentic self, and in turn, not to go through with the move…Ultimately, I made a decision based on what I felt right for me, and I acted upon it.

Kayla left her job, partner, and family behind for an adventure in Australia before enrolling in graduate school. While all young adults cannot pack up and go to Australia, we can and should provide the conditions for all young people to metaphorically "go to the other side of the world" and support their need to search for and uncover a new way of being.

Another 24-year-old student, Danielle, struggled with body image issues for ten years. She explained how as a teenager, she felt immense pressure from her socioeconomic sphere to be "pretty and thin" coupled with the expectation to be "athletic and academically successful." When she could not achieve these standards, Danielle felt that she was never "good enough." She sought counseling and healthier role models that agreed with a "feminist philosophy" of body image. Her understanding and acceptance of her body's imperfections increased as she aged: "As I got older I was able to build a strong female identity which celebrated all the aspects of womanhood that I love."

A student with a disability talked about her dependence on relationships in her early twenties: "In an effort to fill a void inside of me I began to search through online dating websites to find a friend or hopefully a romantic interest." After a period of searching, Emily eventually met someone online. However, when they initially decided to meet up, she was afraid to tell him that she was in a wheelchair, because she did not want her identity, values, and interests to be circumscribed by her disability. Despite these insecurities, she decided to enter a romantic relationship. After two years, the relationship ended as

she realized that she was dependent on him to give her a sense of identity. Emily began to wonder if she could find affirmation from within herself, rather than from another person.

> Over the past two years I have been able to reflect on this relationship, I admit that while [in the relationship] I felt a sense of security…[He] was very good looking and when people saw us together they looked in surprise…I would be lying if I did not say that this helped to boost my confidence. It has taken life experience and maturity for me to realize I do not need a handsome boyfriend for people to see me just as they see an able-bodied person.

Like many relationships during early adulthood, this one was a necessary developmental experience toward greater confidence. Again, it is significant to note that even though emerging adulthood is a time of significant upheaval and emotional pain, many young people say they do not have the support they need for deeper insight and introspection.

Relational Crisis and Loneliness

Many students endured a longing for connection and a deep sense of loneliness as they worked toward constructing a positive sense of self without relying on another person. Justin explained his confusion, distress, and isolation when his long-time girlfriend broke his heart during his second year in college:

> For the next six months I tried desperately to work things out, I stopped caring about school and friends so I could put all my energy into her…I was completely isolated and withdrawn into my own world of misery…My world was now consumed by obsessing over her and what happened to me…I made people hate me because I was so out of control. No matter what anyone said I refused to change until I realized on my own that I had to.

This relationship was interwoven into his life; it gave him an anchor, a sense of stability. When it ended, he spiraled down into a "world of misery" and felt completely lost and isolated. However, the experience allowed Justin to reflect introspectively and re-evaluate his priorities. He rediscovered what he was interested in doing outside of the relationship: "I started to make art and playing hockey again which

I had almost completely stopped doing." These painful experiences have a profound impact, even, as is true in this case, solidifying the decision to go to graduate school to train to be a therapist.

Developing and maintaining good peer relationships is an essential task throughout life but especially salient as students are transitioning away from old friends into new environments. Anna described her struggle to cope with the sudden news of a medical condition that changed her social life and daily routine. When she was diagnosed with a condition that damaged the lining of her esophagus, she had to completely stop eating acidic foods. She explained her distress with not only having to change her lifestyle and her relationship with her peers but, also, having feelings of being an alien to her own culture. She wrote:

> My social group and culture made this difficult. It is challenging to make a change when your peers are not. My boyfriend would cook dinner for us but would cook with foods that I could not eat…My peers knew about the condition but since it did not affect them they would carry on with their normal routine. You cannot really meet over coffee when you cannot order coffee, or go out to dinner when you cannot eat what is on the menu.

The medical condition abruptly changed Anna's life and it was difficult for her interpersonally because of the habits that she and her peers adopted as part of her lifestyle prior to being diagnosed.

Marissa discussed the struggle to end a relationship. She expressed feeling "utterly hopeless" and "trapped by circumstance" when her boyfriend became abusive toward the end of the relationship. She wrote, "For about 5 years of that relationship I felt like the most worthless human being alive." She goes on to describe how she was able to improve her state of mind with inspirational readings and by seeking support from a freshman-year teacher that gave her a sense of hope. Again, out of the resolve to remove herself from a painful relationship came greater self-understanding:

> It wasn't until the spring of 2009 that I learned how drastically life could change and what I was capable of. I have great ability; my empathy and love for others is not a curse but a blessing and neither makes me helpless or weak.

These pivotal periods, when young adults are working hard to make social connections, rebound from difficult ruptures in routines and relationships, and find a sense of wholeness from within themselves, are fertile ground for introspection and insight.

Self-Discovery and Resilience

Every narrative articulated the opportunity for personal growth embedded in each challenge they faced, no matter how painful. When students spoke about struggle, they also spoke about strength; when they spoke about deep loneliness, they also spoke about the hope they held for true intimacy; and when they spoke about "losing themselves" to the demands of the other, they also spoke about recovering a sense of self that was more confident than ever.

When we read answers to the online questionnaire that followed our research participants one or two years after they wrote their reflection papers, we were struck with how much insight students continued to gain from these challenging experiences. Their answers are a testimony to the natural resilience of young adults striving to grow personally, in spite of, or maybe because of, difficult times. Kathleen points out the grieving process that took place when she realized that what is possible might not be in line with her wishes. "I have mourned the loss of the mother I thought I had," she said, "and I am beginning to accept that it is something I will never have."

After feeling "hopeless and victimized" and that the world "just isn't for me," Leah became more compassionate toward herself, realizing that she is a "young woman who experienced a lot of trauma." After a long struggle she gained "faith that things would eventually get better." As noted in several of the quotes above, one of the most profound changes is the shift from relying on others to make change happen, to self-reliance and responsibility. Brett said he now realized that, "While the people in my story were instrumental to change, the core of change comes from within."

Facing constant transition and adjustment is a reality for young adults. Caleb pointed out what research also shows–that successful transitional experiences are cumulative (as are unsuccessful ones). He said, "I feel that each time builds upon the others as I learn more about who I am and how these

experiences have shaped me." Melanie commented that, looking back on her narrative, she realizes that, "I had a much narrower understanding of it while it was going on, and now I can see what I did wrong and how I can act differently."

The Critical Role of College Counseling

To understand more about the mental health issues that arise in college counseling centers, we conducted a focus group interview in the spring of 2014 with staff and interns at the college counseling center where the students in our study are enrolled. Like most counseling centers, there is a limit to the number of counseling sessions a student can have; at this college the limit was ten sessions per academic year. However, the focus group participants explained that the limit is "flexible" and everyone sees long-term clients. When asked if the number of sessions allowed matched the needs of students, one counselor replied, "I would say it's not enough, we have many clients who would keep coming if they could."

In exploring the reasons why students come to the counseling center, we asked what issues are the most prominent and how these issues have changed over the last few years. The response reflected the findings in our narratives:

> Anxiety, depression, relationships, navigating social landscape, financial, leaving home, hard
> time with being away from home and adjusting, difficulties with parental relationships,
> particularly if parent had addiction, romantic and sexual concerns, first semester academic
> decisions...Ten years ago anxiety was not at the top of the list. There is a striking change. Before
> ten years, it was probably depression and now it is anxiety, panic attacks, performance anxiety,
> social anxiety, and various forms of anxiety.

When asked about the roots of this anxiety, the counselors' answers focused squarely on issues of societal pressures: "Social media, a sense of keeping up with Joneses, but now its like keeping up with celebrities." The findings discussed in previous sections parallel what counselors told us, "There is a sense that you should try harder…there is a feeling of not being good enough." The increase in anxiety

noted by counselors parallels the economic downturn between 2009 and 2013, so we wondered about the economic stresses students were experiencing while in school. One counselor responded that students are sometimes upset by their dealings with financial aid; she noted, it can be "world crushing" when people in administrative positions do not respond sensitively and kindly, especially when students are feeling vulnerable.

When we asked about the barriers to accessing support from the counseling center, we learned that there are structural, relational, and emotional barriers. One focus group participant said,

> I always feel that the people who most need to come in are probably not the ones coming… picking up the phone and making an appointment for the counseling center could feel just impossible. For students who are stressed it just feels like one more thing to do…For some of the younger students, either they are not used to making appointments for themselves, they don't know if they need to come in, or they feel awkward about it.

Finally, we asked, "If the counseling center had an unlimited budget and unlimited resources what would you change to address the mental health needs of the student population?" Not surprisingly, the counselors' answers focused on access, outreach, and innovative strategies for "in-reach." Their ideas included having more clinical staff, unlimited sessions, more psycho-ed out in the college community, more visibility, being active at orientation, more freshmen seminar classes, relaxation rooms, light boxes, and biofeedback. Outreach was emphasized so that, "Students can see our faces and connect with us and feel comfortable coming in to talk to us."

Conclusion: A Developmental and Culturally Sensitive Approach to College Counseling

In the last decade, there has been an increase in disabling mental health struggles for college-age students, particularly depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. External factors such as financial stress and the marginalization of the lived experience of first generation students, students of color, sexual minority students, students with disabilities, and women, pose particular challenges for some students.

The twenty-one students that generously allowed us into their lives provide a unique window into the struggle and strength that coincides with the transition out of high school and into college.

The first time we presented on this topic, a student band kicked off the conference with a fabulous rendition of Tyrone Wells' song, Sink or Swim. It goes like this:

Caught in the middle of a crossfire

Lost my balance on a high wire

Trying to figure out what to do…

Kamikaze airplanes in the sky

Are we going down or will we fly?

This could be a shipwreck on the shore

Or we could sail away forevermore

This time it's sink or swim, sink or swim…

Take a deep breath

No more time left

This is what I thought I wanted

Why am I afraid?

The feelings expressed in this song portray the risk, fear, and uncertainty of being 20-something. As young African American men and women make their way to higher education, many of them do so while being quite literally, "caught in the middle of a cross-fire." First generation students often begin their college days without the benefit of a knowing parent that can guide them through the administrative maze of college resources like financial aid. Students with mental health concerns must leave their usual supports and reconstruct a new support network. More students than we ever know come to college having experienced trauma in their lives. Many, perhaps most, students wonder, "This is what I thought I wanted; why am I afraid?"

Four themes emerged from our analysis: Identity, Image, and the Other; Interpersonal Crisis; Self-Discovery; and the Push and Pull of Cultural and Family Ideals. These echo Arnett's (2000, 2015) features of emerging adulthood: Identity Exploration; Instability; Self-Focus; Feeling In-Between; and Possibilities. As young people journey toward adulthood and into college, they do so by navigating contexts that are increasingly complex and demanding. Familiar roles, settings, activities, ways of interacting, and even food and language undergo major shifts during this period. It is understandable that many people feel off balance as they reconstruct themselves in a new context. While some may characterize this period of development as a time of crisis, we also see it as a time of tremendous creativity, altruism, passion, and courage.

College counseling centers have an important role during this process. Lack of funds and resources slow the movement toward more effective support for students. Our findings underscore the need for college counseling that is accessible, developmental, strength-based, and culturally sensitive. Our literature review and research findings point toward some important responsibilities for people that work in college counseling centers:

- Make every location across the college campus safe for *all* students by cultivating a climate of equality, acceptance, and compassion; know where and when students feel more vulnerable and change those spaces

- Educate students, faculty, administrators and all ancillary services (sports, financial aid, health clinic, registrar, admissions, etc.) around cultural competence and sensitivity to mental health issues

- Establish strong relationships with administrators and faculty; train them to be alert to mental health issues and to know how to respond

- Be proactive and anticipate the needs of students that might encounter difficult times, such as, students that are first generation, have experienced trauma, and/or minorities

- Bring counseling services out of the office and into college campus life through regular events, seminars, discussion/support groups (preferably with food), and orientation activities

- Actively address all forms of oppression, such as sexual violence, racism, religious intolerance, etc.

- Bring students into the counseling center through "in-reach" and informative social events

- Make it possible for students to form a student advisory group to work with the college counseling center on outreach, education, priorities, and response; enlist and empower students as collaborators in campus mental health

- Communicate in line with students' social media habits

- Use experiential activities, such as, psychodrama, outdoor adventure, and arts

- Provide insight-oriented, therapeutic work that gets at the root of depression and anxiety–problem-solving and crisis intervention have a place in college counseling but should not be all it does;

- Know the community services available near campus and know the people that staff them in order to access support for students needing more intense interventions

College counselors are working harder than ever, in increasingly stressful circumstances, and often without the support and resources they need. Our recommendations encourage a shift in the way college counseling centers typically operate. At the macro level, we believe there is a need to educate and collaborate with others–students and faculty in particular–to be part of a comprehensive, campus-wide support network. Outreach that enlists the help of supportive and empathic others on campus will strengthen the safety net around each student. In terms of micro-level counseling dyads, our research participants voiced a viewpoint that what they most needed, and what was missing from their lives, was a trust-worthy guide to scaffold *insight-oriented work*. Students in crisis are presenting a mandate and college counseling centers have the opportunity to do more than they have in the past. Opportunities to carefully articulate and reflect upon these developmental and crisis experiences matter. When students are

in environments where they feel a sense of safety and belonging, when they receive non-judgmental support that increases self-awareness, when they are able to fully explore the depth of their distress, and when a trusted ally becomes a witness to their hope and resilience, they simply feel, think, and act better.

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