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Relationships Between Self-esteem, Perceived Academic Abilities,
and Intended College Attendance

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The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1997) conducted multiple surveys between 1967 and 1994 that revealed a drop in the income to poverty ratio scale, from 0.74 to 0.66 suggesting that families are getting poorer and are in need of more help if children are planning to attend college in the future. Understanding the adversity that low-income families face, it is relatively easy to see the difficulties that students from these families endure when considering post-secondary education. The financial portion of school is only part of the equation. Because of the growing number of families classified as low-income, programs helping low income youth overcome adversity are becoming increasingly important.

TRiO is an Educational Opportunity for Low-Income and Disabled Americans and present at more 1,000 colleges, universities, community colleges, and agencies in America. Their commitment is to provide educational opportunities for all Americans regardless of race, ethnic background or economic circumstance. Along with this commitment, Congress established a series of programs to help low-income Americans enter college, graduate and move on to participate more fully in American society. While student financial aid programs help students overcome financial barriers to higher education, TRiO programs help students overcome class, social and cultural barriers to higher education (<http://www.coenet.us>).

As mandated by Congress, two-thirds of the students served by TRiO must come from families with incomes under \$28,000, where neither parent graduated from college. More than 2,700 TRiO programs currently serve nearly 866,000 low-income American students in sixth through twelfth grade. According to TRiO, thirty-seven percent of the students are White, 35% are African-American, 19% are Hispanics, 4% are Native Americans, 4% are Asian-Americans,

and 1% are listed as "Other," including multiracial students. TRiO programs serve twenty-two thousand students with disabilities and more than 25,000 U.S. veterans (<http://www.coenet.us>).

Students in TRiO's Upward Bound program are said to be four times more likely to earn an undergraduate degree than are those students from similar backgrounds who did not participate in TRiO. Nearly 20 percent of all Black and Hispanic freshmen entering college in 1981 received assistance through the TRiO Talent Search or Educational Opportunity Center programs, and students in TRiO's Student Support Services program are more than twice as likely to remain in college than those students from similar backgrounds not enrolled in the program (<http://www.coenet.us>). Considering students in TRiO programs come from underrepresented groups and the low percentage of these groups in higher education (Sallie Mae Foundation, 2006), the affect of TRiO is immense.

There are many factors affecting low-income, underrepresented students from attending college, such as finances, peer influence, and self-esteem (Garfinkel, 2003; Coleman, 1965). Some studies have found self-esteem to be positively correlated with academic achievement and negatively correlated with counterproductive behavior, like aggression and delinquency (Alves-Martins, Peixoto, Gouveia-Pereira, Amaral, & Pedro, 2002; Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005). Because self-esteem has been found to play a role in academic performance, we found it necessary to incorporate a shortened version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1989) in our study.

It is in our interest to understand how self-esteem affects adolescents in their pre-college schooling to better help them adjust and become better prepared for higher education.

Addressing the problem earlier or during a time when children are seeking the help of others, and

doing what we can to encourage and increase their self-esteem would be beneficial to them in many ways. Thus, our study examines how self esteem relates to intended college attendance.

There are many variables that contribute to students' decisions concerning college attendance. To what degree each affects that decision is unknown. We hope to find significant relationships between intended college attendance and self-esteem that will shed light on differences between those who intend to attend college and those who do not. More specifically, we hypothesize that intended college attendance will decrease when self-esteem is low and conversely, intended college attendance will increase as self-esteem increases.

Method

Participants

Participants were 83 senior high school students (males = 28, females = 55) from various urban high schools in Idaho. The majority of the students were Caucasian (Caucasian = 40, Latino = 28, Asian = 6, African American = 2, and other = 6). All students were involved in a college preparation program designed for low income, underrepresented college students, TRiO. Seven of the 83 students reported not planning on attending college. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Materials

Students were asked whether they planned on attending college. In addition, self-esteem was measured by an abridged 5-item version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1989; $\alpha = .87$) due to lack of time available with students. In addition to self-esteem, researchers asked questions concerning student's perception of their math and writing skills, grades, family support or pressure, helpfulness of career information and college visits. A four-point Likert scale was

used, ranging from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (4). In addition to the above items, we collected demographic data.

Procedure

TRiO staff members were responsible for survey administration. TRiO staff members pulled students out of their classes at different times of the day and interacted with them on a one on one basis. Staff members read to all students prior to the survey a disclaimer stating that if any questions made them feel uncomfortable they did not have to answer it and they had the option to quit the survey. The survey took 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Students completed the survey on scantron sheets.

Results

To examine the relationship between intention to attend college directly after high school and self-esteem, we ran an independent samples t-test. Given a small number of students that reported that they did not plan on attending college, it is not surprising that we did not find a significant difference in self-esteem between individuals that planned to attend college ($M = 11.65, SD = 3.28$) and those who did not plan to attend college ($M = 10.17, SD = 2.56$), $t(81) = 1.08$. To further examine the influence of self-esteem on variables related to college attendance, we ran correlations between self-esteem and survey items, shown in table 1.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine associations between those who planned to attend college and those who did not. Some of our hypotheses were confirmed, whereas others were not. Our first hypothesis was that high self-esteem would predict planned college attendance. Previous research has suggested that high self-esteem is related to academic achievement (Alves-Martins et al., 2002; Donnellan et al., 2005). However, it was not found to be significant which

might have been due to the low number of students who reported they were not planning on attending college after high school. It also may be that we used five questions from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale, instead of the full scale. This possibility should be investigated more because of the strong relation between academic achievement and self-esteem.

One possibility for the lack of findings concerning our main hypotheses is the survey length. If it were possible to create a longer survey with multiple questions for each variable of interest, the end results may be different. This would allow researchers to increase the number of responses per variable. In addition, our sample was composed of high school seniors who are awaiting graduation and basing their perception on what they foresee in the future. The fact that we did not have access to students who graduated and either advanced to college or not, contributed to a major loss of valuable data that undoubtedly would have influenced our results. Though, only 7 of the 83 students surveyed reported not planning on attending college after high school, the number could be more than 7 that actually do not attend college when it comes time to enroll. Whether they plan on attending college or not is only what they plan on doing in the future and so the variables affecting whether that actually happens might not be measured accurately. In addition, the results in this study are a survey of potential reasons for these students not to attend college, whereas if we had access to graduated students, they could inform us better about which variables actually contributed to them not advancing to college in retrospect.

There were some interesting correlations between self-esteem and other questions on the survey. First, there was a negative correlation between student's perception of how helpful the career information was and self-esteem. It could be that students are discouraged about their future because they do not know a specific interest. Also, there was a negative correlation

between self-esteem and how students perceived the college visits. That is, those students who have a low self-esteem were likely to have realized that college was not a possibility through college visits. In this case again, they may be discouraged about attending college. It could be that leaving their social support network makes it difficult for them to go to college. Probably the most interesting finding was that those who had lower self-esteem also reported that their math and writing skills were holding them back from attending college. Perhaps these students have anxiety over their abilities in these areas, which could contribute to lower self-esteem. Also, there was a positive correlation between self-esteem and student perception of adequacy of their grades for college; that is, those who had a higher self-esteem also perceived their grades as adequate for college. Perhaps math and writing skills provide a greater source of self-esteem measure than do grades.

Future research should examine why self-esteem is negatively correlated with college visits and career information. This could help guidance counselors and staffs involved in planning college visits change certain aspects of college visits and career information in order to make them more appealing to students with lower self-esteem. Another interesting correlation found in our survey was that lower self-esteem individuals were more likely to report that their math and writing skills were holding them back from attending college. Research should be done to discover if students are dealing with anxiety or are actually lacking in their math and writing skills and how each affect self-esteem. In addition to a longer survey, a sample of students who chose not to go to college, need to be surveyed to find what factors contributed to their absence in higher education.

Limitations

As with any study, there is room for improvement. First, we were not able to survey the entire population of TRiO students, nor were researchers able to ensure the survey was taken in the same setting for each student. Secondly, we did not have an adequate sample size. A third limitation was that we were surveying high school students that consisted primarily of Caucasian females.

Conclusion

To enhance college enrollment, guidance counselors and staff involved in college recruiting programs need to address issues such as anxiety over math and/or writing skills and self-esteem.

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Table 1

Correlations between self-esteem and various survey questions.

Survey Question	Self-Esteem
The career information did not help me in any way.	-.26*
The college visits made me realize that college was not a possibility for me.	-.41***
My writing skills are holding me back from going to college.	-.37***
My math skills are holding me back from attending college.	-.49***
My grades are adequate for college.	.40***
My family is supportive of me going to college.	.38***
My family is pressuring me not to attend college.	-.34***
How many hours per month do you participate in TRiO activities?	-.24*

Note: *p< .05, **p<.01, ***p<.001