

## Adapting to College: Exploration of Psychological Well-Being, Coping, and Identity as Markers of Readiness

**Authors :** Marit D. Murry, Amy K. Marks

**Abstract :** The transition to college is a critical period that affords abundant opportunities for growth in conjunction with novel challenges for emerging adults. During this time, emerging adults are garnering experiences and acquiring hosts of new information that they are required to synthesize and use to inform life-shaping decisions. This stage is characterized by instability and exploration, which necessitates a diverse set of coping skills to successfully navigate and positively adapt to their evolving environment. However, important sociocultural factors result in differences that occur developmentally for minority emerging adults (i.e., emerging adults with an identity that has been or is marginalized). While the transition to college holds vast potential, not all are afforded the same chances, and many individuals enter into this stage at varying degrees of readiness. Understanding the nuance and diversity of student preparedness for college and contextualizing these factors will better equip systems to support incoming students. Emerging adulthood for ethnic, racial minority students presents itself as an opportunity for growth and resiliency in the face of systemic adversity. Ethnic, racial identity (ERI) is defined as an identity that develops as a function of one's ethnic-racial group membership. Research continues to demonstrate ERI as a resilience factor that promotes positive adjustment in young adulthood. Adaptive coping responses (e.g., engaging in help-seeking behavior, drawing on personal and community resources) have been identified as possible mechanisms through which ERI buffers youth against stressful life events, including discrimination. Additionally, trait mindfulness has been identified as a significant predictor of general psychological health, and mindfulness practice has been shown to be a self-regulatory strategy that promotes healthy stress responses and adaptive coping strategy selection. The current study employed a person-centered approach to explore emerging patterns across ethnic identity development and psychological well-being criterion variables among college freshmen. Data from 283 incoming college freshmen at Northeastern University were analyzed. The Brief COPE Acceptance and Emotional Support scales, the Five Factor Mindfulness Questionnaire, and MIEM Exploration and Affirmation measures were used to inform the cluster profiles. The TwoStep auto-clustering algorithm revealed an optimal three-cluster solution ( $BIC = 848.49$ ), which classified 92.6% ( $n = 262$ ) of participants in the sample into one of the three clusters. The clusters were characterized as 'Mixed Adjustment', 'Lowest Adjustment', and 'Moderate Adjustment.' Cluster composition varied significantly by ethnicity  $X^2(2, N = 262) = 7.74$  ( $p = .021$ ) and gender  $X^2(2, N = 259) = 10.40$  ( $p = .034$ ). The 'Lowest Adjustment' cluster contained the highest proportion of students of color, 41% ( $n = 32$ ), and male-identifying students, 44.2% ( $n = 34$ ). Follow-up analyses showed higher ERI exploration in 'Moderate Adjustment' cluster members, also reported higher levels of psychological distress, with significantly elevated depression scores ( $p = .011$ ), psychological diagnoses of depression ( $p = .013$ ), anxiety ( $p = .005$ ) and psychiatric disorders ( $p = .025$ ). Supporting prior research, students engaging with identity exploration processes often endure more psychological distress. These results indicate that students undergoing identity development may require more socialization and different services beyond normal strategies.

**Keywords :** adjustment, coping, college, emerging adulthood, ethnic-racial identity, psychological well-being, resilience

**Conference Title :** ICAPBS 2020 : International Conference on Applied Psychology and Behavioral Sciences

**Conference Location :** Boston, United States

**Conference Dates :** April 23-24, 2020