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# The Role of Mental Health Counseling in College Students' Academic Success: An Interrupted Time Series Analysis

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Retention remains a problem for postsecondary institutions and college students. To address these issues, researchers have sought to identify factors of college success and retention. Findings have consistently shown the importance of psychosocial factors and mental health on college students' academic success. As such, university and college counseling centers are well positioned to enhance students' academic success by addressing psychosocial distress. However, existing literature on the effect of counseling on college students' academic success is mixed, and limitations exist. To address previous limitations of the literature, this study utilized an interrupted time series design to examine differences in students' postcounseling academic success compared to their precounseling academic success. Additionally, we examined the association between changes in students' psychological distress and academic distress for students who endorsed clinical distress at the onset of counseling and changes in their grade point average (GPA) over time. Data for this study consisted of 1,231 clients seen by 49 therapists at a university counseling center. As hypothesized, students' GPAs increased at a greater rate postcounseling compared to precounseling. Additionally, for students who were clinically distressed at the onset of counseling, reductions in their psychological distress were associated with positive changes in their GPA over time, but the relationship between changes in their academic distress and changes in their GPA was not significant. This study suggests that counseling can be beneficial for college students' academic success, in part due to changes in students' psychological distress, but not their academic distress, specifically for clinically distressed students.

## Public Significance Statement



College student success and retention remain a problem for institutions of higher education. Therefore, this study examined the role of university counseling centers in the academic success of college students. Findings suggested that individual counseling at a university counseling center had a positive effect on students' academic performance. Moreover, clinically distressed students who experienced a greater reduction in psychological distress during counseling experienced greater academic success over time.

**Keywords:** academic success, university counseling, psychosocial factors, academic distress, college students

College student attrition remains a critical problem for higher education institutions. Nearly half of full-time, degree-seeking college students do not receive their degree within 6 years (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2018; Radford, Berkner, Wheelless, & Shepherd, 2010). Only 68% of students attending postsecondary education in the fall of 2013 were retained between their first and

second year (ACT, 2015). Moreover, it has been estimated that 20% of first-year, undergraduate students do not complete their second semester of college, and 40% of all college students do not earn a degree (Aud et al., 2011). These statistics are troubling for students and postsecondary institutions in a time of limited financial resources and increased accountability for expenditures. Col-

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**The authors are working in departments of psychology or counseling so this supports that the disciplinary perspective is psychology.**