

STUDENT STRESS AND BURNOUT

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ABSTRACT

Stress is the physical, mental, or emotional strain or tension that students experience as a response to perceived pressures placed upon them. The level of stress experienced as a result of these pressures may have either positive or negative effects. Stress can have a positive effect on learning if students experience it in response to what they consider to be a challenge. However, positive stress is transitory, and, unfortunately, all student experiences are not perceived as a challenge, but as being distressful and producing negative effects. When students experience negative stress over prolonged periods, burnout may occur. Burnout is a feeling of emotional exhaustion that occurs as a result of repeated stressful experiences.

Objectives and Methodology

The purpose of this exploratory study was to determine the extent to which selected academic factors are perceived by students to be stressful and the frequency of occurrence of burnout symptoms. A review of the literature was used to determine the factors which have been shown to contribute to student stress and to identify the states of mind associated with burnout. Only those factors judged to be directly related to school were included in the study. Responses to the stress and burnout variables were measured on 5-point itemized rating scales, where 1=Never, 2= Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, and 5=Always. A convenience sample of 219 students completed a self-report questionnaire. The questionnaire

was administered on campus over a five day period at randomly selected locations and times of day. The survey was conducted approximately three weeks before final examination week.

Findings

Examinations, maintaining grade point averages, time pressures and cost factors are the most stressful items among the students surveyed. It was somewhat surprising to find that at least 20 percent of the respondents answered either "Often" or "Always" to 13 of the 16 stress variables used in the study. This may be indicative of repeated stressful experiences that may lead to student burnout.

Feelings associated with burnout that are most prevalent are tiredness, emotional and physical exhaustion, and anxiety. However, these feelings appear to be counter-balanced by the fact that students often feel happy, optimistic, and energetic. This shows that most students are resilient enough to avoid long periods of negative stress. Also, the more serious indicators of burnout such as feeling depressed or disillusioned are experienced relatively infrequently by the students surveyed.

The correlation coefficient between the sums of the responses to the stressor and burnout items was .56 ($p < .01$). If burnout is a function of stress, then approximately 31 percent of the variation in the burnout scores is explained by the variation in the academic stress variables. This indicates that academic

stressors make a substantial contribution to the overall burnout symptoms felt by students.

Factor analysis was used to group the stress and burnout variables and to assess the possibility of multidimensionality in the concepts. It was concluded that both scales used in the study are basically one dimensional. However, it is important to note that more than one factor was extracted for each scale. While the additional factors explain little of the total variance, the loadings on these factors are very significant and help to interpret the sources of stress and burnout feelings.

Conclusions

Instructors can affect the frequency and level of stress in the way they conduct their classes, their grading methods, and the time pressures they place upon students. While it is obvious that teachers cannot and should not eliminate these sources of stress, it may be possible for them to alleviate some of the pressures and guard against their possible negative effects. For example, professors might consider giving enough grading exercises that no one exercise has an undue impact on the final grade.

Also, since stress can lead to burnout, teachers can assess the level of stress that students are experiencing by observing some of the symptoms of burnout such as declining scores on graded exercises, absenteeism, procrastination, assignments handed in late, and inattentiveness. When these types of behavior are prevalent, little, if any, learning is taking place.