

Stigma, Awareness of Support Services, and Academic Help-Seeking Among Historically Underrepresented First-Year College Students

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to better understand factors that facilitate and hinder academic help-seeking among first generation college students and students from other backgrounds underrepresented in higher education. Ninety-five students, the majority of whom participate in an opportunity or mentorship program on the campus of a public comprehensive college, were surveyed during their first semester in college. Results from a series of multiple regression analyses suggest that stereotype threat and self-stigma present challenges to adaptive academic help-seeking beliefs and behaviors, whereas a greater sense of belonging on campus, participation in the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), and awareness of campus support services minimize these barriers. Recommendations are provided based on these findings for helping students from underrepresented backgrounds who are early on in their college careers to feel more comfortable seeking and benefitting from academic support services.

Keywords: academic help-seeking, belonging, Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), stereotype threat, stigma

“As the demographics of higher education in this country continue to change, so too will the challenges faced by academic support programs that strive to help students overcome obstacles to seeking help with their studies.” (Collins & Sims, 2006, p. 219)

In the United States, a higher education achievement gap continues to exist whereby college students from backgrounds that have been historically underrepresented in higher education (e.g., lower socio-economic status, first in their families to pursue post-secondary studies, possessing a racial or ethnic background not shared by the majority of students who attend college), on average, have lower persistence rates or take longer to complete their degrees (United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, 2011). While different avenues of academic support, both formal and informal, are available on college campuses to help students succeed academically and graduate in a more timely manner (Coladarci, Willet, & Allen, 2013; Rheinheimer, Grace-Odeleye, Francois, & Kusorgbor, 2010), many students from underrepresented backgrounds do not make full use of such assistance. The goal of the current study was to examine academic help-seeking attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors among students from underrepresented backgrounds with the hope of better understanding conditions that make academic help-seeking when warranted more likely.

Literature Review

Academic Underpreparedness

Students who are the first in their families to attend college, from low-income backgrounds, or African-American or Latino/a are less likely to have taken college preparatory courses in high school (Chen, 2005; Rivas-Drake & Mooney, 2008), and first generation students in particular are more likely to report weak academic skills in areas such as reading and mathematics (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). A lack of college-preparatory coursework predicts challenges in academic adjustment once students enroll in major fields of study (Chen, 2005). Along these lines, first generation college students and students who received public assistance in the past were found to feel less academically prepared and to have lower grade point averages (GPA) during their freshmen and sophomore years than students who did not possess these characteristics (Rivas-Drake & Mooney, 2008). Insufficient study skills have also been reported among first generation college students (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). Furthermore, first generation students have been found to earn fewer credits during

their first semesters in college, due to more withdrawal and failure grades, a phenomenon that poses challenges to timely graduation (Chen, 2005).

Benefits of & Barriers to Academic Help-seeking

If students do not do well in a course, they may have difficulty believing they can succeed in future courses, and lack of academic self-efficacy in turn can predict dropout (see Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996). On the other hand, students who are less academically prepared when they enter college benefit in terms of both GPA and college persistence when they receive formal academic support (Coladarci et al., 2013; Laskey & Hetzel, 2011), particularly when such help is received early in their college careers (Tinto, 2004).

Nevertheless, we know that many students from backgrounds that are well-represented on campuses and who are at risk for or already in academic trouble do not seek support in a timely manner (Collins & Sims, 2006). In fact, when students are at risk of the worst academic outcomes, including failing a class, help-seeking becomes least likely (Karabenick & Knapp, 1988). Lack of awareness of services available and how to access them are important potential barriers to consider with regard to academic help-seeking. Other reasons for not seeking help include the necessary step of acknowledging personal challenges during the help-seeking process and the fear that not succeeding after getting help would be a true indication of lack of ability (see Karabenick & Knapp, 1988). These reasons reflect negative self-judgments that may be prompted during the academic help-seeking process. We (the authors) refer to the thinking process in which negative self-judgments or fears of negative judgments from others are triggered when academic help-seeking is considered as *self-stigma for academic help-seeking*. This conceptualization is based upon Vogel, Wade, and Haake's (2006) work relative to self-stigma for mental health service use. Furthermore, we view stigma for academic help-seeking as a potential barrier to (a) seeking help and/or (b) becoming productively engaged with an academic support service provider even when help is sought.

Students from underrepresented backgrounds face additional barriers to academic help-seeking that may be more difficult to detect but no less powerful. Based on their comparative analysis of inter-

views with first generation college students and college students for whom at least one parent had a college degree, Collier and Morgan (2008) found that first generation college students struggle more in navigating how to meet professor expectations, a vital skill for college success and one that may be gained via strategic help-seeking (Collins & Sims, 2006). However, belonging uncertainty—which students from underrepresented backgrounds are more likely to experience than other students—is associated with student doubts about their skills and abilities, which in turn are associated with taking less advantage of learning opportunities and poorer academic achievement overall (Gritsch de Cordova & Herzon, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2007). In particular, a weaker sense of belonging among students has been associated with less frequent discussions of course material with other students and faculty outside of the classroom milieu (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Collier and Morgan (2008) found that first generation students, in addition to reporting feeling too intimidated to seek help from their professors, sometimes did not understand that professors were available to assist them during office hours.

Stereotype threat may also have implications for academic help-seeking (Collins & Sims, 2006). Students who experience stereotype threat feel burdened by nature of belonging to a group for whom others may have expectations of academic failure (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Students from underrepresented backgrounds have been found to express greater apprehension than other students that poor performance would be seen as linked inextricably to their ethnic background (Cohen & Garcia, 2005). According to Massey and Fischer (2005), even students who themselves do not regard stereotypes about their academic ability as true may be reluctant to seek needed help with course material, because to do so would risk confirming such stereotypes. Thus, the potential for being perceived as less capable could cause some students to disengage from the very resources that are designed to be helpful to them.

Academic Support Services and Other Campus Support Programs

Many college campuses house programs that are designed to promote the academic success of historically underserved students. In addition to referring students to academic support services, these

programs may themselves offer study groups, access to tutors, and study skills or remedial courses.

More than half of the students in the current study were drawn from the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at the college where the study took place. EOP's mission is to improve access and retention of historically underserved students. Students accepted into the college through EOP are "admit by exception" (Gritsch de Cordova & Herzon, 2007, p. 12). They are financially and academically disadvantaged and tend to be first-generation college students. The program provides students with a range of support services, including: an extended orientation program the summer before students' first year; EOP counselors with whom students meet regularly throughout their time in college about their personal and educational adjustment as well as professional goals; peer mentors; and an evaluation system whereby students and EOP counselors are informed mid-semester about students' academic progress in courses. To maintain status in EOP, students are required to adhere to a contract that requires them to attend EOP study groups and seek tutoring from the Learning Center when recommended by their counselors. The EOP program on the college campus where this study took place has been recognized for promoting retention and graduation rates that exceed those of the college campus at large as well as EOP programs on other campuses that are part of the same state system.

About 1/4 of our sample was drawn from two other programs: the campus-based Scholar's Mentorship Program (SMP) and the College Science, Technology, Engineering Program (C-STEP) program. As part of its mission to enhance academic success and leadership potential while instilling a sense of belonging, SMP pairs underrepresented and economically disadvantaged students with college faculty and staff mentors and peer mentors. C-STEP is part of a New York State initiative designed to increase the number of underrepresented groups in mathematics, science, technology, and health-related fields. Students in C-STEP are assigned special advisors with whom they can discuss their personal, academic, and professional development. C-STEP also provides peer and professional tutoring for coursework relevant to its mission as well as research and internship opportunities.

Programs like EOP, SMP, and C-STEP appear promising in terms of their potential to counteract some of the barriers to academic help-seeking discussed above. However, there is a gap in the empirical research literature with regard to how program participation and specific program characteristics may contribute to attitudes and behaviors around the actual seeking of academic support.

Research Questions

Investigation into factors that facilitate and hinder academic help-seeking among college students from underrepresented backgrounds is a markedly underresearched area overall (Volet & Karabenick, 2006). The literature reviewed above suggests that particular background characteristics and experiences (e.g., academic underpreparedness; belonging uncertainty; stereotype threat) of students from underrepresented backgrounds on college campuses are tenable predictors of self-stigma for academic help-seeking and lack of awareness of academic support services -- barriers to actual academic support service use; on the other hand, participation in other support programs on campus (i.e., opportunity, mentorship) appears to have the potential to minimize such barriers.

Based upon the theories and findings reviewed above, we developed two sets of hypotheses. First, we hypothesized that self-stigma for academic help-seeking would be predicted by: (a) greater academic need; (b) a poorer sense of belonging; and (c) more intense experiences of stereotype threat. In the statistical analysis testing this hypothesis, we also examined the extent to which type of program participation (EOP, SMP or C-STEP, none) contributed to less self-stigmatizing attitudes.

Next, we hypothesized that greater awareness of academic support-services on campus would be predicted by: (a) a greater sense of belonging; (b) less intense experiences of stereotype threat; and (c) higher levels of self-stigma for academic help-seeking. In the statistical analysis testing this hypothesis, we also examined the extent to which program participation (EOP, SMP or C-STEP, none) contributed to greater awareness of academic support services, knowledge that we envisioned as conducive to help-seeking. Finally, we investigated the extent to which the variables under investigation predicted actual academic help-seeking behaviors.

Our hope was that findings from this investigation would have the potential to inform efforts by Learning Center and other support program personnel—as well as others who work with students from underrepresented backgrounds to promote their academic success—to facilitate academic help-seeking among students who would likely benefit from such support services yet are reluctant to seek them. Students early on in their college careers were chosen as the focus of this investigation because issues of belonging are particularly salient during major transitions (Dasgupta, 2011), because students are at the greatest risk of dropout during their first few semesters of college (Thayer, 2000), and because this is a time during which adaptive decisions and behaviors can influence later success (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Method

Participants

The setting for this study was a mid-size public 4-year comprehensive college in a small town in the Northeast. The sample consisted of 95 first-year students from underrepresented backgrounds: 66 females (69.5%) and 29 males (30.5%). The mean age of the sample was 18.70 years ($SD=.53$). In the current study, 18 students (18.9%) self-identified as African-American, 29 (30.5%) identified as Latino/a, 16 (16.8%) self-identified as Asian, 6 (6.3%) self-identified as White, and 26 (27.4%) self-identified as belonging to two or more of these cultural identities. The majority of the students (58; 61.1%) who participated in the study were first generation college students, whereas 37 (38.9%) were not.

Of the participants, 64 (67.4%) participated in the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) on campus, 23 (24.2%) participated in the Scholar's Mentorship Program (SMP) on campus, and 1 student (1.1%) participated in the Collegiate Science and Technology Entry Program (C-STEP). Seven students (7.4%) did not self-identify as participating in any of these programs.

Measures

Academic need. Academic need was measured via a 7-item self-report scale informed by the work of Collins and Sims (2006) and created for the current study. This scale contained six items (e.g., “I understand my professors’ expectations and standards in most

of my courses”) with responses on a Likert-scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree) and one item asking students if a professor, counselor, or advisor had recommended seeking help from the writing or tutoring center with possible responses of (a) yes, more than once, (b) yes, once, or (3) no. This scale yielded an alpha of .72 in the current study. Higher scores indicated greater academic need.

Stereotype threat. Stereotype threat was assessed with Massey and Fischer’s (2005) 9-item Performance Burden self-report scale with Likert responses ranging from 0 (total disagreement) to 10 (total agreement). Items on this scale include: “If instructors know my difficulty in class, they will think less of me” and “If I excel academically, it reflects positively on my group.” Internal consistency reliability of this scale was found to be .714 among a large sample of students from African-American, Latino/a, Asian and White backgrounds who participated in the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (NLSF; Massey & Fischer, 2005). Higher scores indicated the experience of more performance burden.

Belonging. Sense of belonging was assessed with two measures, the Cultural Congruity Scale (CCS; Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996) and the University Environment Scale (UES; Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996). Gloria et al. (1996) have written that both measures, when administered together, provide a more comprehensive picture of perspectives students have of their learning environment as well as their sense that they have a place there. The CCS is a 13-item instrument that was designed to measure sense of cultural congruence within the college environment among students from minority backgrounds and asks students to indicate the extent to which they have experienced a certain feeling or situation at school (e.g., “I feel I am leaving my family values behind by going to college”) on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (“not at all”) to 7 (“a great deal”). The CCS has been found to yield alphas between the low .70s and the low .80s among students from Latino/a and African American backgrounds (Gloria et al., 1996; Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, & Willson 1999; Winograd & Tryon, 2009).

The UES is a 14-item self-report instrument designed to measure student perceptions of perceived warmth and support provided

by the college environment and student comfort level and sense of feeling valued (e.g., “I feel as though no one cares about me personally on this campus”) and was developed specifically to measure these components among students from racial and ethnic backgrounds underrepresented on college campuses. Students indicate the extent to which each statement applies to them on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (“not at all”) to 7 (“very true”). The UES has been found to yield alphas in the low to mid .80s for students from African American and Latino/a backgrounds (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996; Gloria et al., 1999). Higher scores on these measures indicated a greater sense of belonging.

Stigma for academic help-seeking. This self-report scale was adapted from Vogel, Wade, and Haake’s (2006) Self-Stigma of Seeking Help (SSOSH) scale, which assesses self-stigma for seeking psychological help (e.g., “Seeking help would make me feel less intelligent”). Like the scale upon which it is based, the scale for the current study also contains 10 items measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). The original scale showed strong internal consistency reliability (alphas between high .80s and low .90s) among a diverse sample of college students. The adapted scale yielded an alpha of .82 in the current study. Higher scores on this measure indicated higher levels of self-stigma.

Awareness of academic support services on campus. This 9-item self-report scale was created for the current study and assesses student knowledge of where academic support services are located and how to access services when needed (e.g., “I know where the ... center is on campus”; “I know how to get extra help from ... when/if I need it”). This scale encompasses services available from professors, the Learning Center, academic advisors, the Writing Center, and the Career Center. Response options are on a 4-point Likert scale: 1 (“no”), 2 (“not really”), 3 (“sort of”), and 4 (“yes”). This scale yielded an alpha of .83 in the current study. Higher scores on this measure indicated greater levels of awareness of academic support services on campus and how to access them.

Academic support service use. This seven item self-report scale was created for the current study and assessed students’ use of formal and informal academic support services, including those

included in our awareness measure (“I have visited a professor’s office hours for help or because I had a question”; “I have gone to the Tutoring Center”; “I have gone to the Writing Center”) as well as attending study groups and requesting assistance from classmates. Response options were either “yes, this semester” or “no.” This scale yielded an alpha of .56 in the current study, indicating that the use of certain support avenues correlates only moderately with the use of others.

Procedures

Study participation was limited to students who were freshmen in the fall of 2010 and who met at least one of the following three criteria: (a) participant in one of the programs described above (SMP, EOP, C-STEP; see “Participants” section above), (b) member of a cultural group that contributes to a diverse society (e.g., African-American, Latino/a, Middle Eastern, Asian, bicultural background), or (c) first generation college student. These participants are part of an ongoing longitudinal study investigating predictors of academic achievement and retention among underrepresented college students. Participants completed a packet of questionnaires in paper-and-pencil form that included the measures described above towards the end of their first semester in college.

Data Analyses

Program, academic need, cultural congruity, university environment, and stereotype threat scores were entered as predictors, along with covariates (sex, ethnicity, generational status), in two sets of multiple regression analyses, first with stigma for academic help-seeking as the dependent variable and next with awareness of academic support services on campus as the dependent variable. In the model predicting awareness of academic support services, stigma for academic help-seeking was also included as a predictor. Finally, both barriers were entered along with the other predictors into a multiple regression model predicting academic actual service use during the students’ first semester in college. For all multiple regression analyses: students in SMP and C-STEP were combined into one group, EOP program participation served as the reference group for the program variable, and students from African-American backgrounds served as a reference group for the ethnicity variable. Standardized beta weights

(β 's) are reported to simplify interpretation of effect sizes.

Missing data were rare ($\leq 3\%$ per variable included in the regression analyses reported below). If a participant was missing one or more items on a predictor or outcome variable, this score was not included. A multiple imputation missing data analysis was performed in SPSS across five imputed data sets and a pooled data set yielding comparable effect sizes and statistical significance levels to those reported below. According to Cohen (1992), a sample of this size ($N=95$) is sufficient to detect medium effect sizes in multiple regression analyses with five predictor variables at the $p < .05$ level.

Results

Background Variables

Male students ($M=75.86$, $SD=12.79$) reported higher levels of cultural congruity than female students ($M=69.34$, $SD=12.51$), $t(91)=-2.311$, $p < .05$. Students in EOP reported higher levels of academic need ($M=20.00$, $SD=8.47$) than students in SMP and C-STEP ($M=16.54$, $SD=9.16$), $t(85)=1.67$; this difference approached statistical significance, $p=.10$. The overall ANOVA model for ethnicity predicting academic service use yielded an $F(4, 87)=2.585$, $p < .05$. In post-hoc tests, students identifying as Asian ($M=3.69$, $SD=1.35$), $p < .01$, and Latino/a ($M=4.31$, $SD=1.42$), $p=.08$, reported lower levels of overall academic service use than students from African-American backgrounds ($M=5.00$, $SD=1.24$), with the second difference approaching statistical significance. Students did not differ in a statistically significant manner on any other predictor or outcome variable based on gender, ethnicity, program participation, or first generation college student status. During their first semester in college: 70 (73.7%) of the sample reported having participated in a study group; 72 (75.8%) reported having visited a professor's office hours for help or because of a question; 64 (67.4%) reported using the Tutoring Center; and 28 (29.5%) reported using the Writing Center.

Correlations among Predictor and Outcome Variables

As can be seen in Table 1, greater levels of belongingness as measured by cultural congruity and comfort within the university environment were related to lower levels of self-stigma for academic help-seeking. On the other hand, stereotype threat was positively

Table 1

Correlations among predictor and outcome variables (N=94)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Predictor Variables							
1. Academic need	---	-.29**	-.19	.07	.08	-.04	.29*
2. Cultural congruity	---	---	.41**	-.49**	-.34**	0.09	.06
3. University environment			---	-.39*	-.44**	.27**	.05
4. Stereotype threat				---	.46**	-0.14	-.12
Outcome Variables							
5. Stigma (SSOSH)					---	-.36**	-.13
6. Awareness of services						---	.47**
7. Use of services							---
<i>M</i>	18.64	71.38	81.28	42.59	14.35	30.55	4.39
<i>SD</i>	8.99	12.89	10.23	14.32	5.56	5.61	1.36

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

related to self-stigma. Comfort within the university environment was also positively related to awareness of support services on campus, whereas stigma surrounding academic service use was negatively correlated with awareness of academic support services. Finally, both academic need and awareness of academic support services were positively associated with actual academic service use.

Regression Analyses

Our first hypothesis proposed that self-stigma for academic help-seeking would be predicted by: (a) greater academic need; (b) a poorer sense of belonging; and (c) more intense experiences of stereotype threat. In the statistical analysis testing this hypothesis, we also examined the extent to which program participation (EOP, SMP or C-STEP, none) contributed to less self-stigmatizing atti-

tudes. This multiple regression model yielded an R^2 value of .377; $F(12,77)=3.879$, $p<.001$. Males reported higher levels of stigma for academic help-seeking than females, $\beta=.210$, $p<.05$, representing a 1/5 of a SD difference. Both university environment ($\beta=-.230$), one of our measures of belonging, and performance burden, our measure of stereotype threat ($\beta=.298$), were statistically significant predictors (see Table 2). As perception of the university environment as a place

Table 2
Regression analyses results for self-stigma

Predictor	Self-Stigma for Academic Support Service Use ($N=90$) ^a		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	β
No program	-.939	2.409	-.042
SMP or C-STEP	1.859	1.346	.148
Academic Need	.025	.063	.041
Cultural Congruity	-.057	.051	-.132
University Environment	-.125*	.059	-.230*
Stereotype Threat	.117**	.043	.298**

Note. Sex, ethnicity, and first generation status were included as covariates. EOP was the reference group.

* $p<.05$. ** $p<.01$.

where students are valued and experience comfort and warmth increased by 1 SD , self-stigma for academic support service use decreased by between 1/4 and 1/3 of an SD . On the other hand, with a 1 SD increase in the experience of stereotype threat, self-stigma for academic support service use increased by almost 1/4 of a SD . Thus, our hypotheses that a sense of belonging would decrease stigma for academic help-seeking and stereotype threat would increase such stigma were supported. All of these effect sizes were small. Neither academic need nor cultural congruity emerged as statistically significant predictors of self-stigma surrounding academic support service above and beyond the other predictors in the model, nor did we find that program participation (EOP, SMP or C-STEP, no program participation) predicted statistically significant differences in self-stigma.

Our second hypothesis proposed that greater awareness of

academic support-services on campus would be predicted by: (a) a greater sense of belonging, (b) less intense experiences of stereotype threat, and (c) lower levels of self-stigma for academic help-seeking. In the statistical analysis testing this hypothesis, we also examined the extent to which program participation (EOP, SMP or C-STEP, none) contributed to greater awareness of academic support services on campus and how to access them. The overall model yielded an R^2 value of .430 and was statistically significant, $F(13,75)=4.347, p<.001$. Neither measure of belonging (cultural congruity, university environment) nor stereotype threat emerged as a statistically significant predictor (see Table 3). These findings did not support corresponding

Table 3
Regression analyses results for awareness of services

Predictor	Awareness of Academic Support Services on Campus (N=89) ^a		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	β
No program	-9.518**	2.356	-.435**
SMP or C-STEP	-6.262**	1.385	-.476**
Academic Need	-.058	.062	-.093
Cultural Congruity	.028	.051	.063
University Environment	.063	.059	.114
Stereotype Threat	-.010	.043	-.024
Self-Stigma	-.244*	.111	-.239

Note. Sex, ethnicity, and first generation status were included as covariates. EOP was the reference group.

* $p<.05$. ** $p<.01$.

hypotheses. Self-stigma, however, predicted awareness of academic support services in the expected direction, $\beta=-.239, p<.05$.

Furthermore, compared to students in EOP, students who did not participate in a program, $\beta=-.435, p<.001$, and students in C-STEP or SMP, $\beta=-.476, p<.001$, were much less aware of academic support services on campus. These standardized beta weights represent between 1/3 and 1/2 of a *SD* difference, small to medium effect sizes.

Our final research question examined the extent to which actu-

al academic service use would be predicted by the variables under investigation. This model yielded an R^2 value of .465; $F(14,74)=4.588$, $p<.001$. Students from Latino/a backgrounds reported nearly statistically significantly lower rates of academic support service use than students from African-American backgrounds, $\beta=-.234$, $p=.06$, a $1/5$ of an SD difference. Students in SMP and C-STEP reported much lower levels of academic service use than students in EOP, $\beta=-.403$, $p<.01$, a $1/3$ to a $1/2$ SD or small to medium effect size difference. Students higher in academic need reported greater use of academic support services, $\beta=.206$, $p<.05$, a $1/5$ SD increase in academic service use with each 1 SD increase in reported academic need. Finally, awareness of academic support services on campus was a statistically significant predictor of overall academic service use, $\beta=.311$, $p<.01$, a $1/3$ SD increase in actual service use with each 1 SD increase in awareness of services.

Table 4

Regression analyses results for use of academic support services

Predictor	Academic Support Service Use on Campus (N=89) ^a		
	B	SE(B)	β
No program	-.351	.624	-.064
SMP or C-STEP	-1.274**	.360	-.403**
Academic Need	.031*	.015	.206*
Cultural Congruity	-.007	.011	-.075
University Environment	.007	.012	.062
Stereotype Threat	-.008	.014	-.061
Self-Stigma	.019	.028	.075
Awareness of Services	.076**	.027	.311**

Note. Sex, ethnicity, and first generation status were included as covariates. EOP was the reference group.

* $p<.05$. ** $p<.01$.

Discussion

Our goal in this examination was to identify avenues that may facilitate academic support service use when warranted while contributing to student engagement once service use is initiated. As

hypothesized, we found that students who felt less comfortable in and supported by the university environment also associated academic help-seeking with personal feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. This result extends upon findings that students from underrepresented backgrounds who experience higher levels of belonging uncertainty may incorporate fewer additional opportunities to learn into their academic experience (Walton & Cohen, 2007). We also found, as hypothesized, that self-stigma for academic help-seeking was predicted by the performance burden dimension of stereotype threat, according to which students believe that poor academic performance contributes to professors and other students looking down on members of the group to which they belong (Massey & Fischer, 2005). This was the strongest effect we observed in the hypothesis-testing portion of our analysis, lending support to Massey and Fischer's (2005) view that the risk of confirming stereotypes contributes to reluctance for academic help-seeking. It is also worth noting that when all variables in the model were considered together, the male students in the study appeared to associate academic help-seeking with personal feelings of inadequacy and inferiority to a greater extent than female students in the study. This difference may be explained by Wimer and Levant's (2011) finding that conformity to masculine gender norms including self-reliance was associated with academic help-seeking reluctance. Neither participation in a program on campus nor level of academic need appeared to be associated with the experience of more or less self-stigma pertaining to help-seeking.

Our second investigation focused on predictors of awareness about academic support services on campus and how to access such services. We found that students who participated in EOP reported greater awareness of support services on campus than other students in the study. This finding suggests that EOP personnel are effective in communicating this information to students in their program—an important step given the academic disadvantages students in EOP bring with them to college. We also found that the less students associated academic help-seeking with feelings of inadequacy and inferiority, the more aware they were of academic support services and how to access them. This finding suggests that self-stigmatizing attitudes may interfere with seeking out or retaining logistical infor-

mation concerning academic support services on campus.

The nature of our third analysis allowed us to examine which student characteristics and experiences predicted actual use of academic support services, including those provided by professors, tutors, and academic advisors. EOP program participation was the strongest predictor of service use. Students identifying as Latino/a reported lower levels of service use than students from African-American backgrounds. Finally, students reporting more need for academic assistance and more awareness of academic support services on campus also reported greater use of these services.

Implications

Awareness of barriers faced by students from underrepresented backgrounds in accessing academic support services can inform outreach efforts by and between Learning Center staff and other personnel who work with students from underrepresented backgrounds to promote their academic success (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). The recommendations below are provided as potential tools with which to engage students from underrepresented backgrounds who are struggling with their coursework in the academic help-seeking process.

Reducing self-stigma. When introducing the availability and nature of academic support services, as well as when providing such services, individuals who support students academically can take steps towards minimizing the potential for self-stigma among underrepresented students in need of assistance, including: reframing academic help-seeking as educational and professional development and as an intellectual enterprise—experiences from which every student can benefit; and creating opportunities for academically successful peer mentors to disclose their own academic help-seeking experiences, given evidence that disclosure of a stigmatized status during contact among individuals of equal status reduces stigma (see Hinshaw, 2007).

Also during referrals as well as actual help-seeking sessions, students can be engaged in conversations about their attitudes and expectations about academic help-seeking and about their adjustment to college (see Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). For self-stigma related to stereotype threat in particular, emphasis during referrals and service

provision should be placed on academic challenges and opportunities to achieve one's potential (e.g., getting more out of one's education through one-on-one and small group discussions; improving one's ability to express important ideas in writing) rather than remediation (see Fischer, 2010). For self-stigma related to a diminished sense of belonging, students should be assisted to internalize the message that concerns about acceptance are common among students from all ethnic backgrounds, and that such concerns do not mean that students actually do not belong in college (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Additional attention should be directed towards communication with male students from underrepresented backgrounds—a demographic that is less likely to persist in higher education than female students from similar backgrounds (Aud, Fox, & KewelRamani, 2010)—as our findings suggest that they are inclined to experience somewhat higher levels of self-stigma for academic help-seeking.

Improving awareness of academic support services on campus. The finding that students who participated in EOP reported significantly higher levels of awareness of support services on campus than other students in the study suggests to us that communication of this information to students via EOP orientation programs and individual mentoring meetings is effective in increasing such knowledge. Moreover, tutoring and study groups are built into the program itself. Recommendations based on this finding can be generalized to other personnel who work with students from underrepresented backgrounds. For example, professors and advisors should be encouraged to share information about how to access academic support services on campus, including office hours, in written and oral communication early in the semester and whenever a referral is made. They should highlight the availability of such services at times of the semester when exams and papers are announced as well as when deadlines are approaching.

As a regular part of practice, Learning Center and other academic support personnel could communicate to professors, advisors, mentors, and other support program personnel their willingness to visit classes and participate in outreach and orientation programs in a manner that: speaks about services offered and their benefits; puts a human face on the services provided; addresses self-stigma; and

normalizes concerns students may have about “not belonging in college” when academic challenges are experienced. By the same token, professors, advisors, and mentors should consider inviting Learning Center and other academic support staff to the classroom and to meetings with students. Academic support service centers could be included as friendly destinations on informal and formal tours of the campus for students who are well-represented and underrepresented alike.

Facilitating service use. Messages about the value of academic support services, such as those communicated by EOP counselors—as well as the offering of such services within the context of a program—appear to be effective in influencing adaptive academic help-seeking behavior. Students from Latino/a backgrounds may need additional encouragement to seek out assistance when needed, given the lower rates of service use reported among this subsample in our study and Zurita’s (2007) findings that students from Latino/a backgrounds who did not persist in college reported “not taking the initiative and using university services” (Zurita, 2007, p. 137) as a reason. Finally, students from underrepresented backgrounds who appear to be less cognizant of their specific academic challenges should be encouraged to seek out services at the same time that these challenges are pointed out—supportively and as early as possible—as barriers to meeting their academic potential.

Strengths and Limitations

The predictors we chose to focus on—belonging and stereotype threat—have been found in past research to be salient predictors of other adaptive academic behaviors and academic outcomes (e.g., Massey & Fischer, 2005; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Furthermore, we focused on students early on in their transition to college, a time when belonging uncertainty and self-doubt are likely to be highest (Dasgupta, 2011) and applied the concept of self-stigma—increasingly recognized as an important factor in mental health service use (see Vogel et al., 2006)—to the academic help-seeking context, where it has been rarely examined.

Larger subgroups of students from different ethnic backgrounds would likely have allowed us to detect additional statistically significant differences in academic help-seeking knowledge, attitudes,

and behaviors. The inclusion of a larger comparison group of students who share background characteristics with the study sample yet do not participate in programs on campus already designed to instill a sense of belonging is also warranted, as such students are likely at even greater risk of academic underachievement and dropout. This research was also completed at a single institution; therefore, the findings are limited in generalizability. Furthermore, the college where the study took place has been recognized for the relatively effective support programs already in place for underrepresented students. Such sampling and study characteristics may have contributed to more conservative effect size estimates than if they had not been in place.

Future Directions

Longitudinal research is needed that investigates attitudes towards, experiences in, and patterns of academic help-seeking relative to GPA, credits earned, persistence, and time to graduation among students from underrepresented backgrounds. Help-seeking behaviors specific to courses in which a student is struggling are important to consider in such investigations. Comparisons of associations between academic help-seeking behavior and the variables examined in this study across disciplines (e.g., Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) vs. non-STEM fields) and conditions under which stereotype threat may be more and less prevalent (e.g., instructor or tutor from underrepresented vs. majority background, a “critical mass” of students from underrepresented backgrounds in courses vs. solo status) also have the potential to shed further light on academic achievement disparities.

Conclusion

Academic support service provision to students from underrepresented backgrounds is an important avenue for reducing higher educational disparities. We believe that the suggestions outlined above have the potential to contribute to a social context in which students from underrepresented backgrounds who are in need of assistance become more comfortable both initiating and continuing to make use of academic support services. Such service use—particularly during the transition to college—in turn has the potential to contribute to improved academic achievement, retention in postsecondary institutions of learning, and timely graduation.

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