Purpose of the Study

Life transitions (e.g., from high school to college) can be stressful for emerging adults. However, there is a dearth of research on the stressors that transfer college students experience and how they react to and cope with these stressors. This study compares two types of transfer students, i.e., two-year community college transfer students versus transfer students from another four-year university, and compare them with native students (i.e., those who began their four-year university education as a freshmen at ISU). Moreover, we examine different types of stressors and as well as different types of reactions to stressors and coping strategies.

Participants

The sample consisted of 155 undergraduate psychology majors enrolled during the 2010 spring semester at a medium-sized state university in the midwestern region of the U.S. who volunteered to complete an anonymous online survey. Of these, 28 were transfer students from a community college, 11 were transfer students from another four-year university, and 116 were native students. The mean age of the total sample was 20.79 years. Most students were White (87%), female (82%), and resided off campus (61%). The mean for having attended the current university was 2.20 years and their self-reported grade point average (GPA) was 3.13.

Measures

Students first answered personal and school information (e.g., age, gender, and GPA). Then, they completed the 51-item Student-Life Stress Inventory (Gadzella, 1991; α = .94), which has two sections. The first section deals with overall stressors (α = .89) experienced at school during the past year, with five subscales: frustrations (α = .78), conflicts (α = .80), pressures (α = .74), changes (α = .88), and self-imposed stressors (α = .55). The second section deals with reactions to stressors (α = .89) during the past year, with four subscales: physiological (α = .82), emotional (α = .80), behavioral (α = .71), and cognitive appraisal (α = .85). Next, they completed the 28-item Brief COPE (Carver, 1997), which measures situational coping at school during the past year and has three subscales: emotion-focused strategies (α = .76), problem-focused strategies (α = .81), and dysfunctional coping strategies (α = .76).

Results

First, we conducted preliminary analyses to find out whether there were pre-existing differences between community college transfer students, transfer students from another four-year university, and native students. These groups did not differ statistically by GPA, gender, or race. However, there were significant differences by age (p = .001), with community college transfer students being significantly older (M = 23.50) than both transfer students from another four-year university (M = 20.82) and native students (M = 20.14); as well as by where they currently live (p = .001), with most native students living on-campus (92%) but most community college transfer students (86%) and transfer students from another four-year university (91%) living off-campus. We also found significant differences by how long they have been attending ISU (p = .028), with community college transfer students attending ISU for a shorter period (M = 1.68) than native students (M = 2.33) or transfer students from another four-year university (M = 2.09). Thus, age, current residence, and length of time at ISU became covariates in all main analyses.

A MANCOVA, with overall stressors and reactions to stressors as dependent variables and the three groups as the independent variable, was significant, F(4, 139) = 3.07, p = .017. However, follow-up ANCOVAs showed significant differences only for stressors, F(2, 139) = 4.336, p = .015, with native students (M = 70.36) experiencing significantly more overall stressors than both community college transfer students (M = 61.81) and transfer students from another four-year university (M = 58.26). Specifically, the only significant stressor that undergraduate psychology majors experienced was self-imposed, F(2, 137) = 5.54, p = .005, with native students (M = 21.70) experiencing it significantly more than both community college transfer students (M = 18.56) and transfer students from another four-year university (M = 18.28). An additional MANCOVA, with coping strategies as dependent variables and the three groups as the independent variable, was not significant.

Conclusions

The current study suggests that transfer students either from a community college or a four-year university do not experience more stressors than native students. Actually, it is native students who experience more self-imposed stressors than their counterparts! Moreover, there were no group differences in either the reactions to college life stressors in particular or to coping strategies in general. We speculate that the type of life transitions that may be most important, or stressful, for emerging adults is from high school to college and not transferring from one institution of higher education to another. Future studies should use a longitudinal design to shed light on this.