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# Homesickness at College: Its Impact on Academic Performance and Retention

Jie Sun    Linda Serra Hagedorn    Yi (Leaf) Zhang

*For this study we identified factors exerting significant influence on homesickness and explored the impact of the homesick experience on students' academic performance and retention in the first year in college. The findings reveal 2 constructs underlying the homesickness scale: homesick separation and homesick distress. Demographic variables found to impact students' level of homesickness included gender, residence, and parental education. Homesick distress resulted in a significant, albeit small, explanation of the variance of first-semester GPA and first-year retention.*

Student adjustment to college has been an important topic among college administrators, faculty, academic advising, and mental health counseling (Crede & Niehorster, 2012; Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Thurber & Walton, 2012; Wouters, Germeijs, Colpin, & Verschueren, 2011). Although the public has traditionally regarded transition to college as a positive adventure and opportunity for personal development, students face multiple challenges, including managing their lives independently, establishing new friendships, and acclimating to the new routines and academic criteria (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Thurber & Walton, 2012). During their adjustment, first-year college students may experience a sense of displacement owing to the abrupt shift from their previous familiar environments. This experience of separation and its subsequent psychological symptoms has frequently been

identified as homesickness, which can produce negative social and intellectual consequences (Scopelliti & Tiberio, 2010; Thurber & Walton, 2012). Almost everyone experiences homesickness at some point during their lives (Thurber & Walton, 2012). Although a mild form of homesickness may improve healthy attachment behaviors and coping skills (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2010), intense homesickness can result in anguish and lead to a lack of concentration and ability to perform (Burt, 1993; Stroebe, Vliet, Hewstone, & Willis, 2002).

Homesickness can be prevalent and have important impacts on a wide variety of individuals including military personnel, immigrants, boarding school students, and college students. Due to their critical stage of development, college students may be particularly subject to longitudinal impairment on cognitive-motivational-emotional dimensions (Van Tilburg, Vingerhoets, Van Heck, & Kirschbaum, 1999) should homesickness become overly evasive. Severe homesickness in college students can produce less adaptability to the new environment and higher levels of psychological disturbance and absentmindedness (Fisher & Hood, 1987).

Numerous researchers have studied the phenomenon of homesickness and its determinants in college students, including students' demographic background (e.g., Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007), psychological

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predispositions (e.g., Chow & Healey, 2008), and environmental characteristics (e.g., Watt & Badger, 2009). However, little has been done to explore the relationship between homesickness and students' actual academic performance and retention. This study was designed to add to the body of literature by assessing the impact of homesickness on academic performance and retention among first-year, first-time college students. In addition, due to the fact that most studies on this topic are psychological research, the implications are constrained to parents and students, and hardly affect the practice and policies in universities. Hence, to bridge the gap between understanding homesickness as a merely psychological phenomenon and the paucity of literature in the field of higher education, a study through the lens of higher education is needed. Three specific research questions were addressed in the study:

1. What factors predict first-year, first-time college student homesickness?
2. What is the impact of homesickness on students' academic performance?
3. What is the impact of homesickness on students' first-year retention?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Homesickness in College Transition

The first-year of college may present a difficult time of adjustment (Giddan, 1988). Academic pressures as well as social challenges have been the focus of college transition research and are viewed as primary concerns for new college students (Elizabeth & Sigal, 2001). Living away from home for the first time can add anxiety of being separated from existing family bonds for many new college students (Fisher, Murray, & Frazer, 1985). In addition to the changes in family support, college students are also distanced from their

previous network of friends and forced to face the challenge of forming a new social network (Elizabeth & Sigal, 2001). Many students who experienced college transition reported pain and disappointment with social interactions and relationships (Langston & Cantor, 1989).

Medalie (1981) argued that the development tasks in college transition involve "both divestment of the past and investment in a new life" (p. 75), and entering college means "the death of childhood" (p. 75). The loss of intimacy with precollege friends and family ties can generate a heightened concern about these relationships (Elizabeth & Sigal, 2001). Grief and emotional distress may go along with the adjustment process. A mental state produced in such a major life transition is "homesickness." This term is defined by Fisher and Hood (1987) as "a complex cognitive-motivational-emotional state concerned with grieving for, yearning for and being occupied with thoughts of home" (p. 426). Fisher et al. (1985) found that homesickness is not a unitary construct; rather, it covers a wide range of individual experiences, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. The primary focus of homesickness is on former home environment, and the less dominant features include feeling insecure and unhappy in the new environment.

Thurber and Walton (2012) believed it more suitable to conceptualize homesickness as a "normative pathology whose intensity varies along a continuum," rather than categorize it into a dichotomous measure of homesick or not homesick. Table 1 summarizes the qualities of normal and problematic homesickness. It is notable that previous research has not provided clear values to differentiate normal from problematic homesickness. Even though the American Psychiatric Association (2013) has not listed homesickness as a formal diagnostic term in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, intensive homesickness is most commonly

categorized as an adjustment disorder with mixed anxiety and depressed mood.

New college students experiencing intensive homesickness tend to be lonely, express insecurity in their ability to make close, trustworthy friends, and do not feel socially accepted (Elizabeth & Sigal, 2001). Other studies have found a significant relationship between intensive homesickness and cognitive failures, poor concentration, decreased work quality, lower academic performance, and higher scores on anxiety and depression measures (Brewin, Furnham, & Howes, 1989; Burt, 1993). Because homesickness has a considerable influence on students' well-being, it is critical for college administrators and educational practitioners to gain a better understanding of its impact on new college students so that appropriate prevention and intervention programs can be developed for a smoother transition to college.

**Risk Factors**

Numerous researchers (e.g., Archer, Ireland, Amos, Broad, & Currid, 1998; Brewin et al., 1989; Flett, Endler, & Besser, 2009;

Kazantzis & Flett, 1998; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Watt & Badger, 2009) have studied homesickness and identified risk factors in three primary categories: demographic backgrounds, environmental influences, and psychological traits.

*Demographics.* Gender, age, and race are the individual characteristics typically studied, but evidence of their impact on homesickness is complex. Regarding the role of gender, some researchers (Brewin et al., 1989; Stroebe et al., 2002) reported no statistically significant differences between males and females, whereas Archer et al. (1998) found female students to have a higher level of homesickness. However, the findings of these studies were consistent that female students were more likely to have a higher level of intrusive thinking about homesickness, to talk about homesick feelings with others, to look for those with similar experiences, and to elicit supportive interpersonal relationships. Similarly, age plays an ambiguous role in homesickness. Some researchers (Kazantzis & Flett, 1998; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007) reported younger people to be more likely to be homesick, but Eurelings-

TABLE 1.  
Qualities of Normal Homesickness and Problematic Homesickness

Dimension	Normal Homesickness	Problematic Homesickness
Cognitive (Burt, 1993; Thurber & Walton, 2012)	Frequent thoughts of home and attachment objects	Constant thoughts of home and attachment objects
	Mild absentmindedness	Severe and problematic absentmindedness
Emotion (Fisher, 1989; Thurber & Walton, 2012; Van Tilburg et al., 1996)	Mild distress	Severe distress
	Mild anxiety	Severe anxiety that prevents activities
	Mild grief	Severe grief and depression
	Some sadness	Extreme sadness that cannot be lifted
	Some feeling of helplessness	Strong feelings of helplessness
Behavior (Brewin et al., 1989; Fisher & Hood, 1987; Thurber & Walton, 2012)	Mild effect on functioning	Functioning severely hindered
	N/A	Withdrawal from most activities

Bontekoe, Vingerhoets, and Fontijn (2000) found age not to be a significant predictor. In addition, minority students have been found more likely to experience homesickness when they are on a college campus that is dominated by the White middle-class culture. This difference may be due to minority students perceiving discrimination and acculturation stress (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Similarly, international students were found to be more likely to experience intense homesickness, especially those with lower English proficiency.

*Environmental Influence.* The effect of geographic distance on homesickness was found statistically significant among college students (Fisher, Frazer, & Murray, 1986), but Stroebe and colleagues (2002) argued that it was accessibility to home playing the crucial role rather than the distance, because college students had freedom to travel between school and home. In addition, other researchers (Scopelliti & Tiberio, 2010; Van Tilburg, Vingerhoets, & Van Heck, 1996) explained the phenomenon differently: Opportunities for communication with home and the time needed to travel back home both moderated the effect of geographic distance, resulting in different psychological distances. Hence it appears to be the psychological distance rather than geographic distance that affected students' homesickness.

*Psychological Traits.* The "anxious-ambivalent" attachment style was found to positively affect homesick distress (Thurber & Walton, 2007). Students with this attachment style feel insecure about their relationship with primary caregivers and easily become socially anxious, causing them to be less likely to seek social support (Thurber & Walton, 2007). They often feel that others have less positive opinions of them and thus encounter more difficulties in making and keeping friends in a new social environment (Thurber & Walton, 2012). This vulnerability can engender dissatisfaction

with school and result in high levels of homesick distress (Thurber & Walton, 2007). In contrast, secure attachment relationships help achieve higher levels of independence and social skills yielding less interpersonal and psychological difficulties in the transition to a new environment (Thurber & Walton, 2007).

Social support is another predictor of homesickness. Students without adequate social support are more likely to be vulnerable to homesickness (Urani, Miller, Johnson, & Petzel, 2003; Van Tilburg, Vingerhoets, & Van Heck, 1997). In addition, lower self-esteem is associated with a higher likelihood and intensity of depressive feelings (Eurelings-Bontekoe et al., 1994; Stroebe et al., 2002) and contributes to vulnerability for both adjustment difficulties and homesickness. Significant differences on self-efficacy were found between homesick and nonhomesick students, suggesting low self-efficacy may be related to being homesick (Smith, 2007).

## Theoretical Perspectives

Two theoretical models were employed to guide this study: Watt and Badger's (2009) belonging theory and Astin's (1993) input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model. The belonging theory postulates that homesickness arises from one's need to belong (Watt & Badger, 2009). This theory was first developed by Baumeister and Leary (1995) from a lens of personality and social psychology, arguing that the need to belong is the fundamental human motivation for interpersonal relationships. Fourteen years later, Watt and Badger (2009) used this theory to study the effects of social belonging on homesickness, showing how homesickness was actuated by the need to belong. The researchers (Watt & Badger, 2009) suggested that homesickness is generated in part from distress at the dissolution of former social bonds, because individuals tend to protect old social bonds in response to the

need to belong. The experimental design in Watt and Badger's (2009) study confirmed the causal role of the need to belong: People whose belonging needs are not met in the new environment may surrender to feelings of distress. Feeling socially accepted in the community is an important component to fulfill the need to belong. Acceptance is related to both leaving the old environment and adjustment to the new environment, and can explain both the loss-oriented and restoration-oriented factors (Fisher, 1989). Hence, Watt and Badger (2009) consider belonging theory as metatheory that can enclose various psychological models (Fisher, 1989; Stroebe & Schut, 1999) of homesickness.

To examine the effects of multiple factors on homesickness and GPA and retention simultaneously, this study also employed Astin's (1993) I-E-O model. The primary purpose is to assess the unique effects of college environmental experiences on subsequent outcomes when students' input characteristics are controlled, resulting in a less biased estimate of how environmental characteristics and experiences influence student outcomes. In Astin's model, input variables refer to "the characteristics of student at the time of initial entry to the institution" (p. 7); environmental variables refer to "various programs, policies, faculty, peers, and educational experiences to which the student is exposed" (p. 7); and the outcome variables refer to "the students' characteristics after exposure to the environment" (p. 7). Considering the fact that some environmental variables might be used as outcomes of early-occurring variables, independent variables can be divided in blocks according to the known or hypothesized sequence of occurrence (Astin, 1993). And late-occurring environmental variables may serve as mediating effect between early-occurring environment variables and outcome variable (Astin, 1993). In this study, the input variables

consist of students' demographic backgrounds, precollege academic preparation, and college influences. The outcome variables are students' homesickness, first fall semester GPA, and first-year retention. Students' homesickness variables were used as inputs in the predictive analysis for students' GPA and retention.

## METHOD

### Data Sources

This study collected data from the MAP-Works survey at a research-intensive, land-grant university in the Midwest (MU, a pseudonym). MAP-Works is a program designed to identify at-risk students so that interventions can follow. The MAP-Works survey was administered online to all first-year, first-time students at the MU in the third week of the fall semester. The MAP-Works questionnaire consists of 145 items focusing on 12 major concepts: (a) academic skills, (b) management skills, (c) health styles, (d) commitment, (e) academic experiences, (f) academic self-efficacy, (g) academic behaviors, (h) campus involvement, (i) peer connections, (j) homesickness, (k) sense of belonging, and (l) overall evaluation of the university. After obtaining an approval from the university's Institutional Review Board, the researchers accessed the MAP-Works survey data from the Department of Residence and merged them with institutional data received from the Office of the Registrar at MU.

### The Sample

Among 13,440 first-year, first-time college students enrolled in MU in 2008, 2009, and 2010, 10,217 students responded to the MAP-Works survey, yielding a response rate of 76%. The majority of the survey participants were White (89.9%), slightly more than half were male (52%), and almost all lived on campus (95.6%). Most of the students were 18 years old or younger (60.2%),

followed by students aged 19 or 20 (39.6%). Overall, the demographic characteristics of the sample represented the first-year, first-time college students at MU.

## Variables

Guided by the theoretical frameworks and relevant literature, this study employed independent variables in the following areas: The first is student background, such as gender, age (18 or younger, 19 and 20, and 21 and older), race/ethnicity (Asian, Black, Hispanic, and White), residency classification (in-state or out-of-state resident), English as the first language, and parents' highest degree. English as the first language was coded dichotomously. Parent's highest degree was recoded into three levels: 1 (*no college degree*) if neither of the parents obtained a bachelor's degree, 2 (*bachelor's degree*) if at least one of the parents obtained a bachelor's degree, and 0 = *graduate degree*) if at least one of the parents obtained a master's degree or higher. The second area is precollege academic preparation, which includes students' ACT scores and ranking in high school. The third area is college environment, which consists of student housing (on campus or off campus) and sense of belonging. The participants were asked to rate their sense of belonging on three questions in the MAP-Works survey using a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*): (a) "Do you belong here?" (b) "Are you fitting in?" and (c) "Are you satisfied with your social life on campus?" A mean score for these three questions was calculated and used as the measure of students' sense of belonging.

This study aimed at exploring factors predicting students' homesickness and its effect on students' GPA and retention, thus the dependent variables are homesickness, first-semester GPA, and first-year retention. Student homesickness was measured through five MAP-Works survey questions: "Do you (a) miss your

family back home, (b) miss your friends back home, (c) feel upset because you want to go home, (d) regret leaving home to go to school, and (e) think about going home all the time?" To better understand students' homesickness experiences, exploratory factor analyses, including parallel analysis and principal axis factoring with the promax solution of rotation, were conducted and identified two constructs: Homesick Separation ( $\alpha = .687$ ) and Homesick Distress ( $\alpha = .894$ ). When investigating predictors for students' GPA and retention, homesickness constructs served as independent variables in both models.

## Analytical Approach

Descriptive analyses were first performed to gain a thorough understanding of the sample regarding student experiences of homesickness. Next, an ordinary least squares multiple regression analysis was conducted to explore significant factors that predict students' homesickness. The same analysis was employed to identify significant variables predicting the student first-semester GPA. A logistic regression was selected to examine what factors predict students' first-year retention because the dependent variable was dichotomously coded. The independent variables were entered in the regression equations in blocks to allow the researchers to determine the changes of the coefficients when a new block was entered in the model, which blocks caused change, and the size of changes in the coefficients.

## Limitations

A limitation of the study is the secondary institutional data collected through the MAP-Works survey. Some important variables, such as students' preexisting psychological conditions, aspirations and academic goals, and their socioeconomic status were not available. The relatively small  $R^2$  values may imply that additional or different variables

should be considered in regression equations predicting homesickness, GPA, and retention. This limitation constrained the researchers' ability to further explain important factors that may have an effect on the dependent variables. Another limitation of the study is that students' feelings of homesickness and sense of belonging may be changing over time. This study was able to capture only a snapshot of student experiences in college. In addition, the small and uneven proportioned sample sizes for racial minorities further restricted the ability to draw conclusions on racial groups. Future research should explore

unique experiences of subpopulations of college students.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Analysis

In the sample, approximately 25% of the students responded as being "moderate" in the degree of missing family and/or friends back home. Less than 8% felt no Homesick Separation and about 10% reported extreme levels of Separation. The majority of the students (64.1%) reported less than a moderate degree of feeling upset due to longings to go

TABLE 2.  
Standardized Coefficients of Moderated Multiple Regression for  
Homesick Separation and Distress

Variable	Homesick Separation			Homesick Distress		
<i>Demographics</i>						
Gender	-0.174**	-0.152**	-0.156**	-0.045**	-0.029**	-0.039**
Age (19–20)	-0.012	-0.018	-0.026*	0.004	-0.001	-0.014
Age (≥21)	0.001	0.001	-0.003	-0.012	-0.012	-0.018
Black	0.040**	0.020	0.010	0.047**	0.025*	0.008
Hispanic	0.027*	0.020	0.017	0.008	0.001	-0.005
Asian	-0.010	-0.011	-0.014	-0.007	-0.007	-0.012
Residence (In State)	-0.094**	-0.109**	-0.110**	-0.053**	-0.067**	-0.071**
English	0.010	-0.001	-0.002	0.02	0.010	0.007
Parents' Ed (No College)	0.092**	0.063**	0.049**	0.113**	0.083**	0.058**
Parents' Ed (Bachelor's)	0.044**	0.032*	0.032**	0.056**	0.044**	0.046**
<i>Precollege Preparation</i>						
ACT		-0.135**	-0.148**		-0.132**	-0.155**
High School Rank		0.023*	0.032**		-0.014	0.003
<i>College Environment</i>						
Housing (On Campus)			0.005			-0.012
Belonging			-0.233**			-0.431**
$R^2$	.047	.061	.115	.016	.033	.217
$\Delta R^2$	.047	.014	.054	.016	.017	.184

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



home and more than half (61.0%) reported “not at all” of regretting leaving home to go to the university. Approximately 40% of the participants responded “not at all” to “thinking about going home all the time.” Only 3% of the sample suffered extreme Homesick Distress.

### Multiple Regression Analysis: Homesickness

A multiple regression analysis was conducted for each of the homesickness constructs, Separation and Distress, using the same set of independent variables (see Table 2). In each regression analysis, the outcome variable was regressed on independent variables by blocks: demographic backgrounds, pre-college academic preparation, and college environment. Overall, the contribution of the demographics and precollege variables to the variances of homesick constructs ranged from .033 to .061. There was a larger increase in variance accounted for homesickness Distress ( $\Delta R^2 = .184$ ) when student belonging was entered in the equation, compared to the increase for Separation ( $\Delta R^2 = .0054$ ).

The regression results indicated that female students, out-of-state residents, and students whose parents did not obtain college degrees had a higher likelihood of experiencing Separation. Similarly, these variables were found to be significant predictors to the Distress dimension in homesickness. Students aged between 19 and 20 years were less likely to experience Homesick Separation, when compared with students who were 18 or younger. However, there was no empirical evidence indicating that age was a predictor to Homesick Distress. Students whose parents' highest degree is a bachelor's degree or lower were more likely to experience homesickness in both Separation and Distress dimensions.

Both precollege academic preparation variables (ACT and ranking in high school) were significant predictors for Homesick

Separation and Distress. ACT had a negative relationship with the dependent variables, suggesting that students with lower ACT scores were more likely to experience homesickness in both homesick dimensions. Ranking in high school positively predicted Separation but not Distress. In addition, sense of belonging was negatively related to both Separation and Distress and had negative relationships with the dependent variables. That is, first-year, first-time college students with a lower sense of belonging were more likely to experience homesickness. Finally, among the two measures of homesickness, only Distress was identified as a negative predictor to GPA. That is, students who experienced less Distress tend to perform better in the first semester in college.

### Multiple Regression Analysis: GPA

When exploring predictors to students' GPA, both Homesick Separation and Distress were added to the equation as independent variables. The final  $R^2$  was .352, indicating 35.2% of the variance in GPA can be explained by the model (see Table 3). The results suggest that female students and racial minorities (African, Hispanic, and Asian) were more likely to have lower GPAs in the first semester. Students whose parents had no college degrees and those whose parents had bachelor's degrees tend to receive lower GPAs when compared to peers whose parents obtained graduate degrees. Both ACT score and ranking in high school were positive predictors to student GPA, suggesting that students who obtained higher ACT scores and higher rankings in high school were more likely to achieve better grades in the first semester in college.

### Logistic Regression Analyses: First-Year Retention

A logistic regression analysis was conducted to identify significant predictors for student first-year retention. The results suggest that the

model had an appropriate goodness of fit ( $-2$  log likelihood = 5742.948, Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness of fit = .540). Overall, as indicated by the Nagelkerke  $R^2$  value, 14.1% variances in student retention can be explained by the model (see Table 4).

The results of the analysis indicate that students who were residents of the host state had higher odds for college retention.

Students whose parents received no college education, on the contrary, had lower odds of retention. Similar to the multiple regression findings, ACT scores and ranking in high school were found to be positive predictors of students' retention. Homesick Separation was not identified as a significant predictor, but Distress was negatively related to student retention, which suggests that students

TABLE 3.

Standardized Coefficients of Moderated Multiple Regression for First-Semester GPA

Variables	First-Semester GPA			
<i>Demographics</i>				
Gender	-0.131**	-0.095**	-0.095**	-0.095**
Age (19–20)	0.004	0.003	0.003	0.002
Age (≥21)	-0.041**	-0.040**	-0.040**	-0.041
Black	-0.113**	-0.067**	-0.067**	-0.067**
Hispanic	-0.072**	-0.055**	-0.055**	-0.055**
Asian	-0.017	-0.018*	-0.018*	-0.018*
Residence (In State)	0.003	0.009	0.009	0.008
English	0.003	0.011	0.011	0.011
Parents' Ed (No College)	-0.167**	-0.103**	-0.104**	-0.102**
Parents' Ed (Bachelor's)	-0.043**	-0.025*	-0.025*	-0.024*
<i>Precollege Preparation</i>				
ACT		0.174**	0.174**	0.169**
High School Rank		0.449**	0.449**	0.449**
<i>College Environment</i>				
Housing (On Campus)			0.004	0.003
Belonging			-0.003	-0.020
<i>Homesickness</i>				
Separation				0.011
Distress				-0.044**
$R^2$	.061	.351	.351	.352
$\Delta R^2$	.061	.290	.000	.001

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

TABLE 4.  
Logistic Regression Results for First-Year Retention Rate

Variables	$\beta$	Odds Ratio	$\beta$	Odds Ratio	$\beta$	Odds Ratio	$\beta$	Odds Ratio
<i>Demographics</i>								
Gender	-0.073	0.930	0.019	1.020	0.033	1.034	-0.015	0.985
Age (19–20)	-0.087	0.917	-0.095	0.909	-0.064	0.938	-0.072	0.931
Age ( $\geq 21$ )	-2.722**	0.066	-2.676**	0.069	-2.578**	0.076	-2.735	0.065
Black	-0.339*	0.712	-0.041	0.960	0.076	1.078	0.087	1.090
Hispanic	-0.312	0.732	-0.25	0.779	-0.199	0.820	-0.200	0.819
Asian	0.024	1.024	0.022	1.022	0.043	1.044	0.019	1.019
Residence (In State)	0.458**	1.580	0.508**	1.663	0.522**	1.686	0.472**	1.603
English	-0.253	0.776	-0.216	0.806	-0.204	0.816	-0.212	0.809
Parents' Ed (No College)	-0.498**	0.608	-0.399**	0.671	-0.348**	0.706	-0.309**	0.734
Parents' Ed (Bachelor's)	-0.096	0.909	-0.078	0.925	-0.082	0.922	-0.050	0.951
<i>Precollege Preparation</i>								
ACT			0.046**	1.047	0.052**	1.053	0.041**	1.042
High School Rank			0.030**	1.03	0.029**	1.03	0.030**	1.03
<i>College Environment</i>								
Housing (On Campus)					-0.052	0.949	-0.054	0.948
Belonging					0.338**	1.403	0.258**	1.294
<i>Homesickness</i>								
Separation							-0.045	0.956
Distress							-0.134**	0.874
Cox and Snell $R^2$	.012		.048		.068		.073	
Nagelkerke $R^2$	.023		.094		.132		.141	

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

who suffered more severe distress had lower odds to be retained.

## DISCUSSION

### Homesickness

Consistent with Gardner and Woosley's (2001) research, this study revealed two constructs related to homesickness: Separation and

Distress. Similar to prior literature on gender in homesickness (Archer et al., 1998), this study found that female students were more likely to feel homesick when compared to their male counterparts. The findings demonstrate that out-of-state students were more likely to be homesick, which resonates with existing literature that indicates geographic distance has a significant impact on first-year college

students' feeling of homesickness (Fisher et al., 1986; Stroebe et al., 2002).

An intriguing finding that had not been previously considered in the literature is the effect of parental education. This study found that students whose parents have more college education were less likely to feel homesick in their first year in college. One possible explanation is that parents who received more college education have a better understanding about college life, thus they are more capable of providing advice and support for their children during transition to college. As a result, their children may experience a lower degree of strain between a high demand in the college environment and a sense of personal control (Fisher & Hood, 1987).

Gender, residence, and parents' highest degree remained significant predictors of homesick constructs after controlling for high school academic preparation and college environmental variables, but the influence of race was reduced and was no longer significant. This finding is contrary to prior research conducted by Poyrazli and Lopez (2007), who argued that in a university dominated by White students, African American and Hispanic students are more likely to experience a higher level of homesickness. Another variable that remained significant was students' ACT scores. Students who had lower scores tended to feel a higher level of homesickness in both Separation and Distress. This may indicate that these students experienced more challenges in their academic studies in the first year of college and thus experienced higher levels of homesickness. Another possible explanation is that students who are less academically prepared for college need more time or support to adjust to the new learning environment.

Echoing with Watt and Badger (2009), the findings of this study suggest that students' sense of belonging was a significant predictor for both constructs of homesickness. This may

indicate that first-year college students are less likely to feel homesick when their belonging needs are satisfied in the new environment. This may also indicate that colleges and universities should develop programs that could fulfill the students' need to belong and better engage them in campus life.

## GPA and Retention

When exploring significant predictors for college student GPA and retention, this study found that first-generation students were more likely to attain lower GPAs and to drop out of college. ACT scores and ranking in high school exerted significant effects on both GPA and retention, indicating academic preparation in high school is significant for students' academic success in the first semester of college. Moreover, academic preparation improves students' chances of retention to the second year of college (Westrick, Le, Robbins, Radunzel, & Schmidt, 2015). Another significant predictor for both GPA and retention was Homesick Distress. A higher level of Distress was associated with a lower GPA and smaller chances of retention. Similar findings in prior research (e.g., Fillpot, 2004; Stoughton & Wanchick, 1990) suggested that homesickness was negatively associated with college students' academic performance and persistence. Different from previous research, this study examined different constructs of homesickness and found that Homesick Separation yielded no significant effects on either GPA or retention. This may suggest that differences between various homesickness constructs should be further explored and their effects on students' first-year experiences need to be better understood.

Gender and race exerted significant effects on student GPA, similar to the results of an early study (Kuh, Curce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008) that identified racial/ethnic gaps in college GPA and past research

(DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004) that found gender as a critical predictor to student first-semester academic performance: Male and racial minorities (African, Hispanic, and Asian) variables were related to lower GPAs. Parents' education was also found having a significant effect on GPAs. Students who had at least one parent with a graduate degree were more likely to have higher GPAs. In addition, students who were better academically prepared in high school were more likely to receive higher GPAs in the first semester in college. Overall, the findings of the study mirror those of previous research that although demographic background and precollege preparation do not explain students' entire first-year college experience, they are closely associated with students' academic performance and retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Residence and sense of belonging are significant predictors particularly for student retention. In-state students and those who had a stronger sense of belonging were more likely to be retained for their second year of college. This finding supports existing literature on student retention that distance to home plays an important role in students' attrition and retention (Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999). The finding also resonates with prior research (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; O'Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012) that the sense of belonging has a positive connection with students' retention.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide important implications for higher education faculty, administrators, academic advisors, mental health counselors, parents, and students. First, our findings enrich the understanding of students' homesickness by providing the following knowledge: (a) A feeling of separation from friends and family is a normal

phenomenon experienced by the majority of college freshmen, but severe forms are detrimental; (b) the intensity of homesick distress varies along a continuum: Although the majority experience less than a moderate degree of suffering, a small proportion of students report severe homesick distress. Therefore in helping students cope with homesickness, practitioners should seek to distinguish students who suffer detrimental thoughts and feelings of separation from those with normative feelings. Parents, students, and advisors are encouraged to openly discuss the feelings and concerns about staying away from home, such as missing friends and family. Students should be assured that feelings of missing home are normal and happen to everyone. However, if students demonstrate symptoms of constant thinking about home and tension, higher education practitioners should intervene to provide timely treatment strategies.

## Prevention

The results underline the importance of sense of belonging in shaping students' homesickness. Collaboration among higher education administrators, faculty, advisors, and parents can improve the quality of efforts to help students form a stronger sense of belonging, which in turn can ameliorate the intensity of homesick distress. A possible strategy includes promoting a prevention program prior to students' matriculation to college and providing additional support upon their arrival.

Prior to students' matriculation to college, higher education practitioners can utilize social networking websites to initiate contacts with new students and assist them to form social support groups (Thurber & Walton, 2012). They can provide students with orientation information about the university and campus environment through the Internet, pamphlets,

and digital conversations to understand possible challenges students may encounter in the new environment (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Returning students and resident advisors can also join these groups to share their positive experiences related to the university. If new students feel socially accepted and supported upon arrival, they are less likely to experience severe homesick distress (Watt & Badger, 2009).

Upon students' arrival, higher education practitioners can aid students in getting themselves acquainted with various aspects of the university (e.g., academic and social), such as offering a genial orientation where social connections are facilitated and arranging workshops in which students can learn what to expect and where to find supports and resources (e.g., resident staff, health center staff, psychologists) when in need. Once students feel more integrated to the university contexts, they are more likely to feel accepted, which will reduce the degree of homesick distress (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

## Intervention

The current study has identified risk factors leading to the higher possibility of homesickness; therefore, higher education practitioners could design intervention programs to target the more vulnerable student sub-populations, helping them prevail over the personal, academic, and social hurdles relating to homesickness.

The results of the regression analyses suggest the following implications. First, colleges and universities should create an atmosphere of greater acceptance across the campus-wide community, specifically for females, out-of-state residents, and students whose parents have less education (Watt & Badger, 2009). For instance, residence staff

may promote productive interactions within and outside the community. Academic advisors can connect students with appropriate campus resources when they are needed. In addition, educational practitioners can coach students in the new skills that are necessary to handle the challenges in the university. Preparedness can expedite students' integration to the academic and social contexts of the new school, the result of which is a boosted sense of belonging and a lessened sense of homesickness (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Although severe homesickness is experienced by only a small proportion of students, the consequence is a much lower retention rate. Hence, if students demonstrate symptoms of intense homesick distress, professional mental health service should be provided. Prevention of severe homesick distress and appropriate interventions are required to help first-year, first-time college students cope through the transitional period. Future researchers must continue to enhance scholars' understanding of the homesick experiences that either facilitate or hinder students' development and growth in college. We suggest future researchers conduct a small-scale study, taking a qualitative approach to understand why some students suffer great distress after arriving at college and to explore possible different results between racial/ethnic groups regarding their academic performance and retention. Future researchers could take a longitudinal approach and collect data multiple times during students' transition process. In so doing, educational researchers and practitioners could gain more insight into first-year college students' behavior and performance.

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