

Knowledge is Power: Utilizing the Theory of Margin to Design Effective First Generation Student Supports

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Theoretical Framework – McClusky's Theory of Margin

Adults are driven by both the need for self-preservation and the need for self-improvement. Adults with margin in life will have the motivation to pursue self-improvement endeavors, such as higher education. Factors central to McClusky's theory:

- Load includes tasks involved in the usual requirements of living such as those connected with family, work, civic obligations and the like; as well as life expectations set by the individual for him or herself.
- Power is a combination physical, social, mental, and economic abilities together with acquired skills that may contribute to effective performance of life tasks.
- Margin is a function of power and load; it measures the difference between power and load of an individual (McClusky, 1970).

Theoretical Framework – McClusky's Theory of Margin

- McClusky proposed a formula to numerically determine an individual's margin in life. He suggested that for an individual to have adequate margin to pursue self-improvement endeavors, they require a load-power ratio of between .5-.8.
- Stevenson (1981) developed an instrument to measure margin called the Margin in Life Scale (MILS)
- The MILS contains 58 items; items are divided into five subscale categories:
 - Health
 - Self-confidence
 - Parenting
 - Religion
 - Interdependence

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. Do traditional first-generation and nontraditional first-generation college students differ in margin in life scores and subscale scores?
2. What is the relationship between margin in life scores and subscale scores and demographic variables?
3. What are the common load and power characteristics experienced by traditional first-generation college students?
4. What are the common load and power characteristics experienced by nontraditional first-generation college students?
5. How does participation in a TRIO Student Support Services program influence the power variables for traditional first-generation and nontraditional first-generation college students?

Findings

Research Question 1: Do traditional first-generation and nontraditional first-generation college students differ in margin in life scores and subscale scores?

- There was no significant difference in the composite MILS scores for traditional and nontraditional FG students
- There were no significant differences in the health, self-confidence, interdependence, or religion/spirituality subscales
- There was a significant difference between traditional and nontraditional FG students in the parenting subscale, with nontraditional students scoring significantly higher in the parenting subscale

Findings

Research Question 2: What is the relationship between margin in life scores and subscale scores and demographic variables?

Composite MILS

- Only level of participation had an impact on composite MILS scores
- The eight-predictor model was only able to account for 15% of the variance in MILS scores
- Overall, the model was not significant in predicting the MILS outcome

Subscale Scores

- None of the demographic predictors had an impact on health, interdependence, or religion/spirituality

Findings

Research Question 3: What are the common load and power characteristics experienced by traditional first-generation college students?

- Family is both a load and power variable for traditional first-generation students.
- School-life balance is a load variable for traditional first-generation students.

Findings

Research Question 4: What are the common load and power characteristics experienced by nontraditional first-generation college students?

- Family is both a load and power variable for nontraditional first-generation students.
- Finances is a load variable for nontraditional first-generation students
- Grit is a power variable nontraditional first-generation students
 - Grit refers to “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelley, 2007, p. 1087)

Findings

Research Question 5: How does participation in a TRIO Student Support Services program influence the power of traditional first-generation and nontraditional first-generation college students?

- Formal program services are influential, especially tutoring and priority enrollment.
- Support from the SSS program staff is invaluable for students.

Summary of Results

- Overall, there were very limited differences between traditional and nontraditional students in both composite and subscale scores
- The influence of parenthood on margin in life appears to be more positive for nontraditional students than traditional students.
- Level of participation impacts composite MILS scores
- The model utilizing demographic variables was able to predict only 15% of the variance in MILS scores
- Qualitative data reveals several relevant factors:
 - While the literature has long supported the supposition that family is an integral part of the college experience, this study demonstrates that family can simultaneously function as both a power and a load variable.
 - Participation in TRIO SSS is a substantial source of power for both traditional and nontraditional first-generation students.

Implications for Practice

- Demographic variables, which are often used in TRIO admissions and in tracking student progress, have relatively little influence on first-generation student's level of margin – and therefore, their ability to pursue higher education.
 - Practitioners should consider the impact of other variables on margin
 - Based on qualitative data, considering student motivation or grit may be a better indicator of margin in first-generation students
- Programmatic elements can address lower parenting subscale scores for traditional students
 - Individual discussion of parenting issues
 - Collectively addressing parenting challenges through workshops, mentoring relationships between traditional and nontraditional first-generation parents, and a support group for first-generation students who are parents

Implications for Practice

- Practitioners should work to mitigate the negative effects of family while capitalizing on the positive effects of family
 - Activities that include family participation (workshops, community activities, etc.)
 - Activities designed to increase student's ability to balance responsibilities of school and family
- Practitioners should also focus on the development of the relationship with students
 - Program structure and activities that are designed to maximize the interaction between students and staff
 - Training and professional development to increase skills and knowledge in interacting with first-generation students

Study Limitations

- The study took place on only one college campus; therefore, study results may not be representative of the larger population of first-generation students in the U.S.
- There was a small sample size in the quantitative portion of the study.
- There is limited scope of the study due to inclusion of only current participants in a TRIO SSS program. Including both TRIO SSS participants and first-generation students not participating in TRIO SSS would have allowed researchers to evaluate more adequately the effects of TRIO SSS on margin in life of traditional and nontraditional first-generation students.
- Future research should consider:
 - Expanding the study to include multiple TRIO SSS programs
 - Examining the difference in margin in life between traditional and nontraditional first-generation students participating in a TRIO SSS program and first-generation students who are not active members of a support program

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