

INTRODUCTION

Emerging adulthood (ages 18–29) is a period marked by various stressors, including academics, relationships, and finances (Arnett, 2000; Garrett et al., 2017).

- Research shows that **college students** experience **higher stress levels compared to the general population**, and this trend continues to rise.

Stress is strongly associated with:

- Decreased physical and psychological well-being (Zochil & Thorsteinsson, 2017).
- Poor academic performance (Hjeltnes et al., 2015).

Challenges in measuring stress:

- The literature reveals that **stress measures vary in how they define and assess stress**, focusing on factors like **exposure to stressors, frequency, duration, and intensity, as well as different life domains** such as academics and relationships.
- This variability makes it difficult to synthesize research on stress and its effects on health.

Stress and Adversity Inventory (STRAIN) (Slavich & Shields, 2018):

- A **self-report measure designed to assess lifespan stress**, used in this study to address the gap in stress conceptualizations.
- Evaluates exposure, duration, frequency, timing (e.g., cumulative, early childhood, past month), intensity, and life domains.
- Provides a comprehensive assessment of life stress without requiring lengthy interviews.

PURPOSE

The aim of this study is to identify which stress conceptualizations (e.g., cumulative, early life, past month; exposure; magnitude; chronic; acute; frequency; specific domains) are most strongly associated with mental and physical health outcomes, providing insights for interventions to improve student well-being.

METHODS

Study Design

- This study uses a 2-part cross-sectional survey design with ECU undergraduates (ages 18–26).

Participants

- The target sample size = 600 participants
- Recruitment will occur through Introductory Psychology courses (with the majority expected to be female, freshmen, and White).
- Additional recruitment efforts will include campus flyers, emails to a random sample of non-freshmen, and oversampling for men and people of color.

Procedures

- Participants will provide electronic informed consent before completing the first online survey.
- Survey 1 (Qualtrics):** Assesses demographics, mental health, and physical health using the following measures:
 - Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10):** Assesses perceived stress levels.
 - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Checklist:** Screens for post-traumatic stress disorder.
 - Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8):** Measures depressive symptoms.
 - Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7):** Assesses symptoms of generalized anxiety.
 - Patient-Reported Outcomes Measurement Information System (PROMIS):** Evaluates overall physical health status.
- Survey 2 (UCLA Portal):** Includes the Stress and Adversity Inventory (STRAIN) and is completed within one week of Survey 1.

Incentives

- Participants receive either course credit or a \$10 gift card for their participation.

Conceptualizing Stress with the STRAIN: Exposure, Duration, and More

Captures Exposure (Yes/No response)

❖ Life Domain: Work/Job

- Q24. Have you ever looked for a job for at least six months, but were unable to find a stable job?*

Captures Duration (Years/Months)

- Q25. How long did you look for a job without being able to find one?*

Captures Intensity (Scale from 1-5: Slightly → Extremely)

- Q26. At its worst, how stressful or threatening was this for you?*

Captures Timing

- Q27. When did this end?*

Captures Timing (Life stage when the stress exposure ended)

- Q28. How old were you when this ended?*

DISCUSSION

- Previous research indicates cumulative and chronic stress may be most harmful to downstream health outcomes, but this association has not been evaluated in emerging adult college students.
- Results will highlight which domains of stress are strongly linked to health outcomes in the emerging adult college student population. This insight can inform targeted interventions and preemptive strategies that promote the well-being of students who experience these stressors.

STUDY PROGRESS

- Funding has been applied for and received to cover participant gift cards.
- ECU's Institutional Review Board and Survey Review & Oversight Committee have approved the study.
- Recruitment and data collection will take place in spring and summer 2025.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funded by the Department of Psychology at ECU and an Undergraduate Research and Creativity Award (URCA) granted to Kaylee Meer.

REFERENCES

