

Gender Differences Within Academic Burnout

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Abstract

Within college, students deal with a multitude of stressors. More than 19 million students are enrolled in college in the United States (US Census, 2015). College stress has been linked to negatively affecting a student's life in a variety of ways causing burnout syndrome, a prevalent issue concerning students within higher education. Burnout syndrome can cause students to encounter course stress, loneliness, negative learning emotion, and others. The purpose of this review is to examine the literature on academic burnout to understand the relationship between gender differences and academic burnout in higher education. Specifically, it explores an understanding of burnout among college students, lists the different effects, and explains several different coping strategies.

Keywords: Academic Burnout, College, Higher Education, Gender

Gender Differences Within Academic Burnout

A significant moment in a young adult's life can be marked by their time at the university, a time when university students can "acquire more independence, experience changes in social systems, gain important life skills, and of course, pursue a degree for a chance at a brighter future" (Stoliker & Lafreniere, 2015, p. 146). Many students' university years can be pivotal moments in their lives; however, this time can also be a recipe for disaster due to the amount of stress and pressure college students endure with college education (Stoliker & Lafrenierer, 2015). College stress can include anything from school demands to feelings of inadequacy due to one's performance or perception. For many students, stress is a major issue as they juggle a variety of other challenges such as academic, social, and personal challenges (Lin & Huang, 2014).

Excessive amounts of stress related to academic sources or other stressors can cause burnout syndrome, the state in which a person has emotional exhaustion, tendency toward depersonalization, and a feeling of lower personal accomplishment (Skodova, Lajciakova, & Banovcinova, 2017). Studies related to burnout mainly concern those individuals enduring workplace stressors and demands, such as those professionals who help others or whose work requires them to have close interaction with others (e.g., healthcare, education, and social work; Lin & Huang, 2014). However, attention has not been paid to students' stressors and coursework load that may lead to burnout among college students. A number of multi-institutional studies have estimated that at least half of all medical students may be affected with burnout during their education (IsHak et al., 2013; Skodova, Lajciakova & Banovcinova, 2017). Student burnout has been linked to dropping out of school, could lead to a decrease in personal health and well-being, and has been found to negatively impact students' overall academic experience (Stoliker & Lafreniere, 2015).

Purpose

The purpose of this review is to examine the literature on academic burnout using an integrative method to understand the relationship between gender differences and academic burnout in higher education. Specifically, we seek to understand academic burnout, highlight the effects of academic burnout, and discover known strategies for working through burnout within higher education.

Method

To support the research purpose, an integrative literature review method was used to identify and synthesize several streams of literature on the topic of gender and academic burnout. An integrative review method is a “form of research that reviews, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature on a topic in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated” (Torraco, 2005, p. 356; see also Callahan, 2010). The process included assessment of the literature using specific keywords within three databases, initial review of the abstracts generated to locate relevant articles, and analysis of these articles to identify major themes within the literature.

Selection of Articles

The review started with an assessment of gender differences and academic burnout across two disciplines: education and psychology. Articles were collected using three different databases: Education Full Text, PsychInfo, and ERIC (Education Resources Information Center). The selected databases were searched using the following keywords: gender, gender differences, academic burnout, student burnout, and learning burnout. The keyword *gender and gender differences* was paired with different wording for academic burnout such as *academic burnout*, *student burnout*, and *learning burnout*. Some of the same results appeared in multiple databases.

For example, when the keywords *gender differences* and *academic burnout* were used, there were 18 results; of those 18 results, many articles were repeats of the articles searched previously, producing no new selections. When searching with the same keyword (*academic burnout*) within the database Education Full Text, most of the results appeared to be associated with adolescent burnout, which was outside the scope of this review. Finally, a third database was searched: ERIC. The same keywords were used within this database, and several different articles emerged. However, certain articles did repeat within this database as well (See Table 1). The search was conducted in August 2017.

Table 1
Literature Review: Number of Articles Selected by Database Source

<u>Database</u>	<u>Keywords</u>	<u>Results</u>	<u>Selected</u>
Education Full Text	academic burnout AND gender	18	1
Education Full Text	academic burnout AND gender differences	9	0
Education Full Text	student burnout AND gender differences	17	0
Education Full Text	learning burnout AND gender differences	5	0
PsychInfo	academic burnout AND gender	9	1
PsychInfo	academic burnout AND gender differences	5	1

<u>Database</u>	<u>Keywords</u>	<u>Results</u>	<u>Selected</u>
PsychInfo	student burnout AND gender differences	4	0
PsychInfo	learning burnout AND gender differences	1	0
ERIC	academic burnout AND gender	38	2
ERIC	academic burnout AND gender differences	32	1
ERIC	student burnout AND gender differences	54	1
ERIC	learning burnout AND gender differences	10	1
Total		202	8

Content Analysis

Article abstracts were screened to identify relevant articles that matched the initial topic. Relevance was determined by analyzing each abstract to verify that each publication was about some aspect of gender differences or academic burnout. For example, an abstract that read “this study investigated the relationship between university faculty's gender, age, academic position, and working environment with their burnout levels” (Tümkiye, 2006, p. 911) would not be deemed relevant. This article focused on the aspects of teacher burnout. For example, a sentence along the lines of “this study surveys academic burnout and life stresses among college students and further assesses whether reports of life stresses can serve as a predictor of academic burnout” (Lin & Huang, 2014, p. 77) clearly encompasses the topic of academic burnout in higher education.

Results

After review of the abstracts, a final set of literature was produced (N=8), and articles were analyzed. Based on the review, only eight articles were published on the topic of academic burnout. Other articles within these databases revolved around job burnout or some variance of burnout in other terms (e.g., employee burnout, teacher burnout, adolescent burnout, international burnout). There was little research around gender and burnout among college students in general. After the review, three themes emerged from the literature: (a) what academic burnout looks like, (b) the effects of academic burnout among students, and (c) some coping strategies for academic burnout.

Understanding What Academic Burnout Looks Like

There are four predictors determined by Lin and Huang (2012) that can predict the onset of academic burnout: self-identity stress, future development stress, interpersonal stress, academic stress. These types of stresses will lead students to feel exhausted or to have a cynical and detached attitude toward their program of study, or they may feel unsuccessful with their progress (Lin & Huang, 2014). Self-identity stress is the stress that is associated with negative perceptions of one's self in appearance, lack of career direction, lack of self-knowledge, lack of confidence, and other negative feelings toward one's self (Lin & Huang, 2014). Future development stress is the stress that comes with finding a job (or lack thereof) because of competitiveness or insecurities about one's worth. It can also be associated with pursuing higher education. Interpersonal stress relates to the lack of friendships and poor communication with others. Academic stress “refers to the stress of academic work, exams, grades, reports, instructor's requirement, and so on” (Lin & Huang, 2014, p. 80).

Academic burnout plagues many students in college. It can be compared to career burnout, because students can experience some of the same types of stressors from courses, course load, or other psychological factors (Lin & Huang, 2014). Just like career burnout, academic burnout can lead to students having higher absenteeism, lower motivation to do work, and a high percentage in dropout (Meier & Schmeck, 1985). Students become burned out by their learning because of academic pressure, homework overload, or other psychological factors like emotional exhaustion, negative attitudes, and low personal accomplishment (Stoliker & Lafreniere, 2015). Academic burnout can be categorized with three factors in mind: low sense of achievement, depersonalization, and emotional exhaustion (Lin & Huang, 2014).

Low Sense of Achievement. The first factor of academic burnout consists of a low sense of achievement. This includes having a decline in feelings of competence and successful achievement in academic learning (Lin & Huang, 2012). In other words, students do not necessarily see their achievements and continually see themselves as unsuccessful.

Depersonalization. The second factor of academic burnout involves depersonalization. Students tend to harbor negative, callous, or an excessively detached response to other people around them (Lin & Huang, 2012). Communication weakens and slowly social interactions become non-existent.

Emotional Exhaustion. The last factor of academic burnout is emotional exhaustion. This factor is described with feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted (Lin & Huang, 2012). Contingent upon stressors associated with college, students can become exhausted with coursework and feel physically worn out.

Effects of Academic Burnout Among Students

Academic burnout affects students in a variety of negative ways. The amount of stress thrust on a student can cause interpersonal alienation, decreased academic performance, increased dropout of academic studies, as well as loneliness, negative learning emotion, and emotional exhaustion. These stressors can negatively impact a student's life. Academic burnout has been linked to decreased personal health and well-being. It can also negatively affect a student's academic experience and their perceptions of stress (Skodova, Lajciakova, & Banovcinova, 2017). Burnout has also been known to influence relationships in a negative manner.

Within the research related to academic burnout, there are not many differences between females and males. Both genders have the same feelings about their program of study. Loneliness was reported in males to be higher than those reports of females; however, both genders reported some form of loneliness alongside academic burnout (Lin & Huang, 2014). Females also reported higher stress levels (Backović, Živojinović, Maksimović, & Maksimović, 2012) than males in different forms (e.g., general stress levels, exams, communication, etc.). Gender differences were scarcely researched within the small number of burnout articles concerning college students.

Coping Strategies for Academic Burnout

Many college students deal with stressors in all different kinds of ways, and there are several coping strategies. Finding personal meaning in everyday tasks, having a strong support system,

obtaining treatment when necessary from counselors, building relationships with peers, faculty, and mentors, engaging regularly in different hobbies, exercising, avoiding an attitude of delayed gratification, and mindfulness training are all simple ways to avoid or cope with academic burnout. There are also many skills that can be taught to students to use to gauge their stress levels and alert them to seek additional help when necessary (Dubac-Charbonneau, Durand-Bush, & Forneris, 2014).

Implications for Adult Education Practice

Being increasingly aware of the negative effects of burnout on students, faculty, counselors, and others who interact with students daily could give more guidance to students facing these college stressors and could potentially encourage them to find effective coping strategies. Stress management classes could be incorporated with orientation and encouraged by faculty and college staff. Resources available for students should be made apparent to allow students to be able to seek resources when necessary.

Future Directions

There has been much research on stress within college students; however, literature and research on academic stress in general is scarce (Lin & Huang, 2014). Further research should follow students longitudinally to understand the effects of burnout over extended periods of time. Other future research could be aimed at understanding different categories of studies, such as graduate students in master and doctoral programs. After understanding burnout in different kinds of college student, interventions can be created and evaluated to treat and prevent burnout among college students.

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