

# Does Childhood Adversity Predict College Student Risk Outcomes?

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## Background

- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are social environment characteristics that may have induced psychological distress before the age of 16 including maltreatment, long-term financial difficulties, familial mental health problems, divorce, and chronic illness within the child’s home (Burke, 2018; Felitti et al., 1998; Kananen et al., 2010).
- Merrick et al. (2019) found that 61% of adults reported having experienced at least one ACE, and roughly 1 in 6 reported suffering four or more ACEs before the age of 18.
- ACEs have been linked to long-term negative effects on health, education, and job potential, including ties to most major causes of death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).
- College student success is primarily defined by college GPA but can be impacted by risk factors such as dimensions of performance such as leadership, physical and psychological health, life skills, and responsibility levels (Schmitt et al., 2007).
- ACEs may present an independent underlying predictor of academic risk for college students not being screened for by universities.

## Objectives

- Explore how the number of childhood adversities a student experienced in their past related to measures of students’ health, well-being, and academic success.
- Further, examine if any significant relationships remain after controlling for student socioeconomic status.
- **Hypotheses:** Broadly, we hypothesized that the number of adverse childhood experiences would be associated unfavorably with survey measures of students’ health, well-being, and academic success.

## Key Findings and Conclusions

Students with a history of more adverse childhood experiences reported: (1) sleeping and exercising less; (2) having to work more hours and spend more time with household and childcare duties; (3) lower physical and psychological health; (4) exposure to more stressful life events; (5) reduced life satisfaction, and (6) increased test anxiety.

ACEs were inversely correlated with student income level, as expected. However, ACEs remained significantly correlated in a detrimental direction with these measures of health and wellness after controlling for income level.

While future research is needed that includes better measures of academic success, these findings suggest that colleges could better predict students' at-risk academically by screening for ACEs and incoming students may be able to benefit from including psychoeducation on ACEs in University Experience.

## Method

- **Participants:** 206 Florida Tech students (109 female; 57.8% White/Caucasian) with a mean age of 20.27 years ( $SD = 3.43$ ).
- **Procedure:** The measures included in this study were part of a larger online Qualtrics survey project administered across three questionnaires designed to take students 30 minutes or less. The survey was IRB approved, and participants received course credit via Sona System for participating in each survey.

**Table 1.** Correlations for Number of Childhood Adversities and Measures of Student’s Academic Risk

Variable	Childhood Adversities	SES Category	Partial Correlation ( $r_{ab.c}$ )
SES Category (Income Level)	–	–.26** ( $n = 197$ )	–
College GPA	.02 ( $n = 178$ )	.06 ( $n = 173$ )	.13 ( $df = 169$ )
Sleep	–.21** ( $n = 204$ )	.24** ( $n = 197$ )	–.15* ( $df = 193$ )
Study Time	.13 ( $n = 202$ )	.04 ( $n = 195$ )	.16* ( $df = 192$ )
Job Time	.21** ( $n = 199$ )	–.17* ( $n = 191$ )	.19* ( $df = 188$ )
Social Time	–.07 ( $n = 200$ )	.15* ( $n = 193$ )	–.02 ( $df = 190$ )
Household Duties Time	.23** ( $n = 202$ )	–.01 ( $n = 194$ )	.25** ( $df = 191$ )
Exercise Time	–.22** ( $n = 201$ )	.27** ( $n = 194$ )	–.16* ( $df = 191$ )
Health and Exercise Score	–.30** ( $n = 205$ )	.16* ( $n = 198$ )	–.25** ( $df = 194$ )
Psychological Health Score	–.32** ( $n = 204$ )	.16* ( $n = 197$ )	–.28** ( $df = 193$ )
Stressful Events Checklist	.34** ( $n = 205$ )	–.04 ( $n = 198$ )	.33** ( $df = 194$ )
Satisfaction with Life Scale	–.27** ( $n = 204$ )	.24** ( $n = 195$ )	–.20** ( $df = 192$ )
Test Anxiety Inventory Score	.20** ( $n = 201$ )	–.12 ( $n = 194$ )	.16* ( $df = 190$ )

*Note.* Partial correlation coefficient presents the correlation between the number of childhood adversities (a) with the listed academic risk variable in the left column (b) after controlling for SES level measured by the participant’s personal or parent’s income level (c). \*  $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .