Does being first in family matter? The role of identity in the stigma of seeking help among first and non-first in family university students

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Abstract

The transition from secondary school to university is often perceived as stressful, perhaps more so for students who are the first in their family to seek higher education, as they might face challenges unique to their situation. Yet, the majority are less likely to acknowledge problems and are unlikely to engage in help-seeking behaviour. The present study, which focuses on first in family students transitioning from secondary school to university, examined relations between identification (private regard, public regard, compatibility) and the stigma (self and other) associated with help-seeking in different domains (academic and mental health), and the moderating role of first in family status. Implications for these findings are addressed within the context of stigma reduction initiatives.

Introduction

In the transition from secondary school to university, students may experience considerable distress as they contend with the change in responsibilities and expectations of a university life while simultaneously leaving established social support systems (Gall, Evans, & Bellerose, 2000). First in family (FiF) students—those who are the first generation in their family to attend an institution of higher education—may face additional challenges that are unique to their situation.

FiF students are embarking on an experience that is novel not only for themselves, but also for their family (Gofen, 2009). The lack of familial socialisation regarding the university environment can mean that their identity as "university students" might be less entrenched within their social networks, perhaps leading to their experiencing less support from their families, and perceiving their parents to believe that university training is not a priority (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). As a result, they may be less likely to disclose the challenges associated with their university experience (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009).

Stigma regarding mental health is known to be a deterrent to seeking help for emotional issues (Eisenberg, Downs, Golberstein, & Zivin, 2009), and for FiF students, stigma might also exist with regard to academic difficulties. Given the pressures on FiF students to succeed and demonstrate the value of their education, they might be less likely to acknowledge the need to seek help for either academic or emotional stressors. The present study examined the stigma associated with help-seeking behaviours of FiF and non-FiF students in their first year of university, and the role that dimensions of identification with their university status play in deterring or facilitating help-seeking behaviours for academic or emotional challenges.

Stigma of seeking help

Early in their school education, students in general may be discouraged from seeking help for problems in order to foster a sense of independence (Nelson-Le Gall & Jones, 1991). Although this might encourage individuals to resolve issues on their own, the social and personal disadvantages of such self-sufficiency can be costly, and have been associated with increased distress (Cruza-Guet, Spokane, Caskie, Brown, & Szapocznik, 2008). Students who perceive that they are at a disadvantage relative to their peers (e.g., FiF students, ethnic minorities, etc.) might be especially concerned about performing well in order to avoid being judged poorly (Cole, Matheson, & Anisman, 2007). Seeking help from an academic advisor is regarded as more acceptable for school and career oriented issues, particularly in comparison to seeking help for emotional and mental health issues (Tinsley, St. Aubin, & Brown, 1982), which may relate to the potential stigma associated with mental illness.

It has been suggested that FiF students are especially prone to stigma perceptions, despite the fact they would benefit most from the professional support resources offered within a university such as faculty advisors, peers and academic support services (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004). Stigma can undermine the esteem and well-being of individuals, diminish access to resources, and act as a barrier to seeking and receiving help (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). Gaining the courage to engage in help-

seeking has been considered one of the biggest hurdles in contending with stressful experiences (Prior, 2012). The decision to seek help might reflect a perception that others will view one's need for help unfavourably (i.e., other-stigma of help-seeking; Vogel, Wade, & Haake, 2006), or be reflected by personal views that seeking help is unacceptable (self-stigma of help-seeking; Vogel, Wade, & Ascheman, 2009). The impact of stigma towards seeking help may be especially relevant for FiF students. These students might be more likely to experience unrealistic expectations and a lack of understanding from their family and friends regarding the challenges they are encountering (Iyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009), and may be concerned about being judged poorly by their university peers.

Identity and identity compatibility

The ability to adapt to the transition to university might, in part, involve the capacity to embrace an identity (Pittman & Richmond, 2009) that buffers against the stressors associated with transition (Iyer et al., 2009). Identification is a multidimensional concept that comprises: how salient the group membership is to the individuals (i.e., *centrality*), the extent to which they derive positive esteem (i.e., *private regard*), as well as their perceptions of how others evaluate the identity (i.e., *public regard*) (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). FiF students have different backgrounds from their non-FiF peers, and therefore may not embrace the university identity (Terenzini et al., 1996) in the same way. For example, they may feel less committed to the cultural values and expectations of an academic institution, and therefore be less likely to derive emotional benefits from the university environment. Moreover, the social aspect of university life may not be particularly germane for FiF students, thus making it more difficult for them to derive emotional and social benefits and merge the new identity into their self-concept. FiF students may perceive greater incompatibility between their life as a university student and their former self (Jetten, Iyer, Tsivrikos, & Young, 2008). Such a disjunction may render them especially motivated to demonstrate competence and be especially vulnerable to the stigma associated with behaviours that undermine their self-sufficiency (i.e., stigma help-seeking). These identity factors may dissuade FiF students from seeking help for either academic or emotional issues (Gloria, Hird, & Navarro, 2001).

The present study

The goal of the present study was to assess the relations between various dimensions of identification as a university student (*centrality*, *private regard*, *public regard*, and compatibility of identity) and the stigma (self-stigma, other-stigma) of seeking help in different support domains (academic and mental health). As FiF students may be particularly vulnerable to challenges associated with the transition to university, it was anticipated that group membership (FiF vs. non-FiF) would moderate the relation between identification and stigma associated with help-seeking behaviour. In particular, it was hypothesised that, (1) although their status as university students would be equally central to FiF and non-FiF students, FiF students would report lower levels of public and *private regard*, and lower compatibility and; (2) FiF status would moderate relations between students' identification with their university status

and the stigma associated with seeking help. Specifically, higher identification and identity compatibility were expected to buffer against negative attitudes towards help-seeking stigma among non-FiF students. Among FiF students, however, the positive identification with their student status would be linked to greater concerns about stigma associated with help-seeking, although this may be less evident when they experience high levels of identity compatibility.

Method

Participants and procedure

Upon approval from the university's Ethics Committee, students participated in an online study described as *Assessing Psychological Factors Influencing Quality of Life and Academic Performance.* Upon completion of the study, participants were debriefed and awarded either course credit or a $10 gift certificate.

Students who reported that neither of their parents attended post-secondary education were considered FiF university students (*n*=83), whereas those who reported that at least one parent had attended post-secondary education were considered non-FiF (*n*=269). The majority of both FiF (*n*=56, 67.5%) and non-FiF students (210, 78.1%) reported their ethnicity to be Euro-Caucasian. However among FiF students, the next most prominent ethnicity comprised South Asian/South East Asian (9, 10.8%), whereas among non-FiF students "other" (e.g., mixed ethnicity) was the next most prominent ethnicity (17, 6.3%). Most participants reported that they had never been in therapy for psychological issues (72, 86.7% for FiF students; 229, 85.1% for non-FiF students).

Measures

The study questionnaire comprised four scales, beginning with a 14-item (Sellers et al., 1998) *Identification* scale, which assessed three dimensions of identity, including *centrality* of the identity, *private regard*, and *public regard*. Responses were made on a seven-point scale ranging from -3 (strongly disagree) to +3 (strongly agree). Inter-item reliabilities for *centrality*, *private regard*, and *public regard* were acceptable (*α*=.73, .80, .79, respectively).

A five-item *Compatibility of Identity* scale (Jetten et al., 2008) was then used to assess how compatible one's identification as a student was with aspects of individual's social background (e.g., family, friends from home). Responses were made on a seven-point scale ranging from -3 (strongly disagree) to +3 (strongly agree) (*α*=.58).

The preceding scale was followed by measures of the stigma of seeking help. The *self-stigma* associated with seeking help comprised five items, for example *I would feel inadequate if I went to an academic counsellor/mental health counsellor for help* (Vogel et al., 2006). Participants were required to complete the measure twice, once adapted for seeking help for academic issues, and then for mental health issues. Responses were made on a seven-point scale ranging from -3 (strongly disagree) to +3 (strongly agree). Inter-item reliabilities for self-stigma for seeking help for academic and for mental health issues were excellent (*α*=.89 and .91, respectively). The *perceived stigma by others* scale was used to examine how individuals perceived they would be judged for the decision to seek help, for example, *If you were to get help from an academic counsellor/mental health counsellor, to what degree do you believe*

that the people you interact with would: react negatively to you (Vogel et al., 2009). Participants were also required to complete this measure twice—once, adapted for academic issues, and then in reference to seeking psychological help. Responses were made on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal). Inter-item reliability for perceived stigma for seeking help for academic issues and for mental health issues were excellent (α=.90 and .92, respectively).

Results

Descriptive statistics

Examination of the descriptive statistics indicated that, contrary to the researchers' expectations, there were no differences between groups' reported levels of identity compatibility, *centrality*, *private regard*, or *public regard* as students. As well, FiF university students tended to report *lower* levels of self-stigma for seeking help than did other university students for both academic issues, and mental health issues. In contrast, no differences were observed for other-stigma regarding academic help-seeking or for other-stigma regarding psychological help-seeking (Table 1). This said, among both groups, there was greater self-stigma, $F(1, 350)=84.07$, $p<.001$, partial $\eta^2=.19$, as well as perceived other-stigma, $F(1, 350)=74.23$, $p<.001$, partial $\eta^2=.18$, associated with seeking help for issues related to mental health, compared to academic issues.

Moderating role of FiF status in relation between identity and stigma of seeking help

It was anticipated that being a FiF student

Table 1: *Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and t-tests as a function of FiF status*

	FiF		Non-FiF		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t* (350)
Compatibility of Identity	1.61	1.02	1.68	1.03	0.53
Identification					
Centrality	0.42	1.14	0.29	1.07	-1.02
Private regard	1.85	0.87	1.66	0.96	-1.66
Public regard	1.12	0.91	0.90	0.96	-1.86
Self-Stigma for Seeking Help					
Academic	-1.75	1.29	-1.25	1.36	2.97[**]
Mental health	-0.92	1.60	-0.40	1.58	2.60[**]
Other-Stigma for Seeking Help					
Academic	1.24	0.45	1.30	0.45	0.93
Mental health	1.60	0.86	1.72	0.84	1.15

[**]*p*<.01

would moderate the relation between dimensions of university identification and stigma associated with seeking help for academic and/or mental health issues. Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted, whereby the group being considered (FiF *vs.* non-FiF) was entered on the first step, standardised scores on the dimensions of identity (*public* and *private regard*) or compatibility were entered on the second step, and finally, the two-way interactions between group and identity or compatibility on the third step. As *centrality* was not significantly related with any of the outcome variables, nor did it serve as a moderator, this aspect of identity was not considered further. To ensure the two groups were as similar as possible across other areas, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and religion were entered as covariates and kept in the model when significant. In the analyses predicting help-seeking behaviours for mental health issues, students' history of receiving counselling was also controlled (coded 0 for no and 1 for yes).

Although gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and religion were entered as covariates, these variables were not significant, and therefore were not included in the self-stigma models. When self-stigma for seeking academic help was the outcome variable, FiF status moderated the relations with the dimensions of university identity, R^2_{change}=.022, F_{change} (2, 346)=4.21, p<.05, and in particular, the relations with *private*, B=-.70, SE B=.25, p<.01, and *public regard*, B=.55, SE B=.23, p<.05. In order to understand the nature of the significant interaction effects, follow-up simple slopes analyses—a procedure used to determine whether the slopes of the interaction effects significantly differ from zero—were performed. Simple slopes indicated that among FiF students, *public*

regard was unrelated to self-stigma, whereas *private regard* was related to *lower* self-stigma associated with seeking academic help (see Figure 1, upper and lower left). Among non-FiF students, *private regard* did not have this buffering effect against self-stigma scores. Rather, as hypothesised, self-stigma for seeking help for academic issues was most evident among this group when they perceived their identity to be held in low *public regard*, and self-stigma diminished as perceived *public regard* increased.

FiF status was also found to interact with university identification in the prediction of self-stigma for seeking help for mental health issues, R^2_{change}=.021, F_{change} (2,345)=3.98, p<.05, and in this instance the relation between *public regard* and self-stigma was uniquely significant, B=.68, SE B=.27, p<.05. Specifically, as seen in Figure 1 (upper right), simple slope analyses showed that among FiF students, self-stigma for seeking help for mental health issues was low, irrespective of level of *public regard*. In contrast, among non-FiF students, as hypothesised, perceptions of lower *public regard* were associated with greater self-stigma for seeking help for mental health issues.

When ethnicity was controlled,[1] B = -.05, SE B = .02, p<.05, FiF status moderated the relation between identity and perceived stigma held by others for seeking help for mental health issues, R^2_{change}=.025, F_{change} (2, 345)=4.66, p<.01. Specifically, among FiF students, as perceptions of *public regard* increased, other-stigma for seeking help for mental health issues was augmented. In contrast, among non-FiF students, *public regard* was not related to

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[1] Controlling for ethnicity. Other demographic variables did not significantly account for any variance.

perceived other-stigma, $B=.43$, SE $B=.14$, $p<.01$ (Figure 1, lower right). Finally, even after controlling for ethnicity, the relation between identity and other-stigma for seeking help for academic issues was not moderated by FiF status, $R^2_{change}=.012$, F_{change} $(2,345)=2.28$, ns, nor were main effects observed. This suggests that identification was not associated with students' perceptions that others would judge them unfavorably for seeking help for academic concerns.

When the relation between compatibility of identity and both self- and other-stigma for seeking help for academic issues was considered, the moderated relation was not significant (self-stigma: $R^2_{change}=.005$, F_{change} $(1, 348)=1.74$, $ns;$ other-stigma: $R^2_{change}=.000$, F_{change} <1). For both groups, as compatibility of identity increased, the self- and other-stigma for seeking help for academic issues were reduced (self-stigma: $B=-.26$, SE $B=.09$, $p<.01$; other-stigma: $B=-.03$, SE $B=0.07$, $p<.001$) (Figure 2). The relation between compatibility of identity and self- and other-stigma for seeking help for mental health issues was not moderated by family status (self-stigma: $R^2_{change}=.001$, $F_{change}<1$; other-stigma: $R^2_{change}=.000$, $F_{change}<1$), nor was there a main effect of identity compatibility. This suggests that students'perceived compatibility between their life as a university student and former self was not predictive of their stigmatising attitudes towards seeking help for mental health concerns.

Discussion, concluding remarks, and implications

Although the transition from high-school to university is often a significant life experience, the transition for FiF students has been viewed as an especially taxing one (Barry et al., 2009). It was anticipated that FiF status would moderate the relation between dimensions of university identification (i.e., *private regard*, *public regard*, and compatibility of identity) and the stigma of seeking help.

Terenzini et al. (1996) suggested the university experience might be less valued within FiF students' domestic and social networks, which may lead to low levels of identification with the university experience. More recent investigators (Finnie, Childs, & Wismer, 2010) have noted that FiF students perceived their parents to be equally supportive of their decision to attend post- secondary schooling, and were just as likely as their counterparts to remain in post-secondary education after their first and second year. The present study supports this more recent argument as it indicates that differences were not evident across the dimensions of identification or compatibility of identity, suggesting that FiF students' university experience may not be so different from that of their counterparts.

Although FiF and non-FiF students did not differ with respect to university identification, this factor moderated the relations between dimensions of identification and stigma of help-seeking behaviour. Specifically, high *public regard* served as a buffer for non-FiF students who reported less perceived self-stigma in seeking help for academic and emotional issues. However, as predicted, this component of identification did not act in this capacity for FiF students, and for the most part, did not influence these students' self-stigma to seek help.

The results that this relation did not hold for FiF students indicates that these students were placing greater emphasis on their personal and private pursuits for the educational aspect of the university experience, and consequently derived less emotional and social benefits from the regard held by others. Indeed, among FiF students, *public regard* was associated with increased perceptions of stigma held by others for mental health help-seeking. Therefore, as expected, others (parents, family, etc.,) were not a source of assurance regarding the stigma of help-seeking. As FiF students may have been particularly motivated to prove their competency, when emotional difficulties were encountered, the stigma regarding seeking help could very well serve as a deterrent.
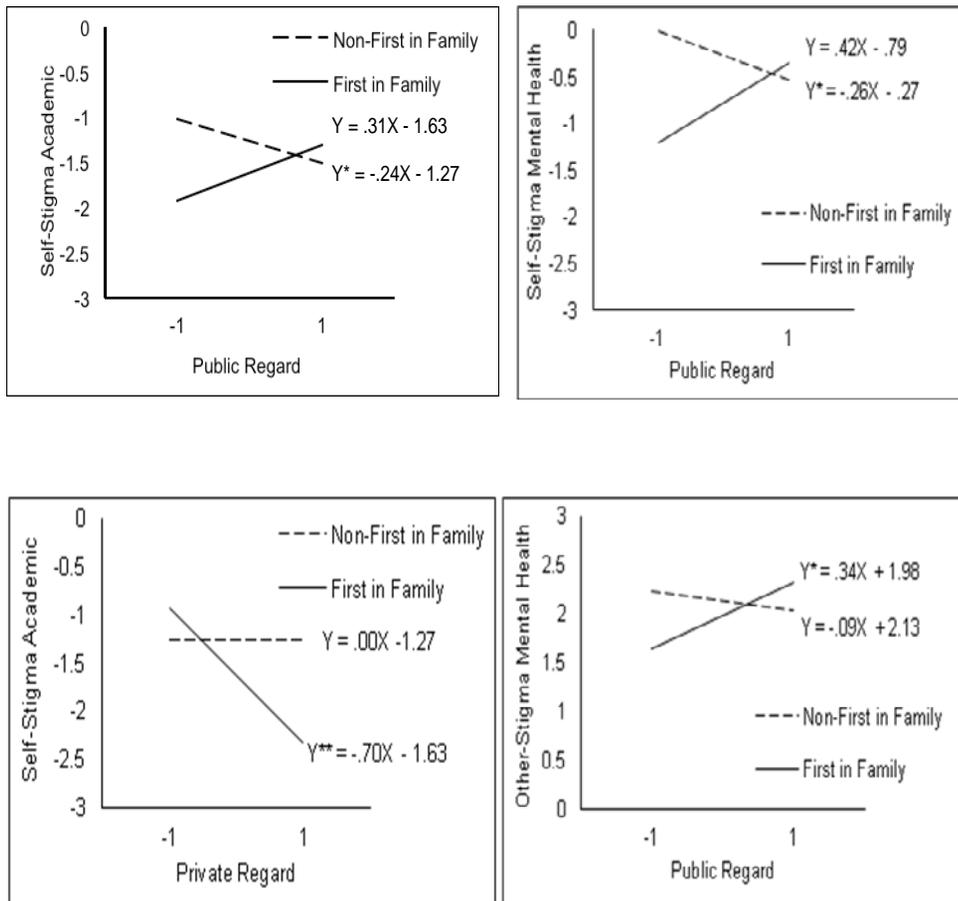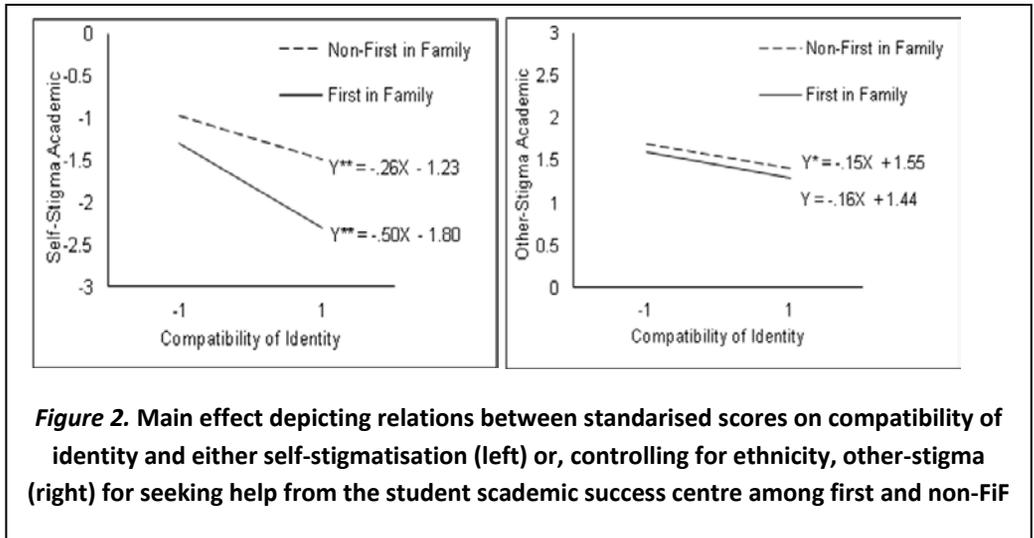

Figure 1. Simple slopes of the relations between standardised scores on either *public regard* (upper left) or *private regard* (lower left) and either self-stigmatisation for seeking help from the student academic success centre, self-stigma for seeking help from the student academic success centre (upper right), or , controlling for ethnicity, other-stigma for seeking help from the health and counseling services (lower right)

Figure 2. **Main effect depicting relations between standarised scores on compatibility of identity and either self-stigmatisation (left) or, controlling for ethnicity, other-stigma (right) for seeking help from the student scademic success centre among first and non-FiF**

Given potential differences in socialisation to the university experience and the contribution that the social aspect of university life provides, it was considered that non-FiF students would derive benefits from greater levels of private regard and that this would serve as a protective resource against the help-seeking stigma. No buffering effects between private regard and mental health issues among FiF students were observed. Moreover, FiF status did not moderate the relation between private regard and the stigma perceived by others for seeking help for mental health issues, suggesting that FiF students do not differ greatly from non-FiF students in this respect. Private regard, however, buffered against self-stigma associated with academic help-seeking. Rather than render FiF students more sensitive to stigma, much like others who have indicated that embracing their identity serves a protective role (e.g., Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001), fostering positive esteem for one's university membership provided a protective resource against the stigma of

academic help-seeking, uniquely among this group. This supports our suggestion that these students may place greater emphasis on their personal educational goals.

In comparing FiF students to non-FiF students, a pivotal component of this study had to do with the notion that FiF students might feel less compatibility between their university life and the values and experiences of family and friends from home (Iyer et al., 2009). Yet, there were no differences in the reported compatibility of student and non-student identities as a function of FiF status, nor was there a significant difference in the relations between compatibility of identity and the stigma of help-seeking. Irrespective of FiF status, greater identity compatibility was associated with lower self- and perceived other-stigma for academic help-seeking. Although it was suggested that a difference exists between FiF students and their counterparts (e.g., Terenzini et al., 1996), as previously noted, the two groups may be more similar than initially anticipated

(Finnie et al., 2010) in relation to their identification as university students. Individuals' social identity is comprised of their membership to multiple groups (Jones & McEwan, 2000), and the possibility cannot be dismissed that FiF students are still contending with competing but equally valued identities. Despite the fact that FiF students' parents and friends might not necessarily relate to the university experience, they might still be positively disposed to seeing education as economically and socially valuable.

The present study identified several differences between FiF and non-FiF students, and the relation between dimensions of identification and the stigma towards seeking help; yet these findings are not without their limitations. Although over half of the participants were of Euro-Caucasian ethnicity, the sample consisted of individuals from diverse ethnicities. However, the sample size was insufficient to explore the implications of specific ethnicities to the observed outcomes. It has been reported that differences exist in the help-seeking behaviour based on gender, ethnic culture, international (vs. domestic) status, and socio-economic status (Eisenberg et al., 2009). Therefore, to further understand differences between FiF and non-FiF students, it will be necessary to determine whether or not FiF students of these various subgroups experience different support systems, pressures, and stigma towards seeking help for academic versus mental health issues.

Challenges regarding the reliability of the measures in the present study should also be acknowledged. It was noted that the compatibility of identity measure demonstrated low reliability, and although this is consistent with previous studies using the same measure (Jetten et al.,

2008), the lack of findings between FiF and non-FiF students with this variable may be related to its psychometric utility. Other studies have utilised the compatibility of identity construct by employing two or three items to tap into this, but have also reported low inter-item reliability (Iyer et al., 2009). Ultimately, it may be useful to generate a measure that more adequately examines the compatibility and fit between one's new university identity and previously established identity. Notwithstanding this concern, the compatibility measure was considered appropriate in the present study as it uniquely tapped into the dichotomy of one's self-concept between their former and latter identity.

The findings from this research that greater levels of *private* and *public regard* serve as a resource in diminishing the self-stigma to seeking academic help in both FiF and non-FiF students speaks to the importance of student identification in promoting help-seeking attitudes regarding stigma. Supporting initiatives that foster the positive self-regard for one's university affiliation could serve to enhance students' self-esteem, and have enduring benefits regarding their willingness to seek help in the face of academic difficulties. Encouraging an environment of positive affect and esteem, and reduced stress, may in turn contribute to a commitment to university and educational goals for all students (Bray, Braxton, & Sullivan, 1999). Implementing programs to shape social norms among students as well as faculty may also be an effective strategy in breaking down barriers and reducing stigma towards seeking help (Eisenberg et al., 2009), particularly given the cultivation of attitudes promoting self-sufficiency and self-determination.

Acknowledgements

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