IMPACT OF A SOCIAL SUPPORT INTERVENTION ON THE TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY

DANIEL LAMOTHE, FIONA CURRIE, SUSAN ALISAT, TREVOR SULLIVAN, MICHAEL PRATT, S. MARK PANCER, and BRUCE HUNSBERGER
Wilfrid Laurier University

ABSTRACT

University marks an important transition in many people's lives, from adolescence to young adulthood. University students often move away from home, establish new friendships, and attempt to cope with academic work that may be much more demanding than that which they have previously experienced. Many have difficulty in making this transition, as evidenced by the fact that a high proportion (up to 40%) of students who enter university fail to complete their degrees. The present study assessed the impact of a support group intervention for students entering their first year of university. Students attended six weekly 90-minute sessions led by male and female facilitators. The sessions focused on issues such as forming new social ties, residential concerns, and how to balance academic and social demands. Social support and transition adjustment measures were administered to three nine-member intervention groups (N=27), and to randomly assigned comparison participants (N=28). For two of the three intervention groups, results indicated that those involved in the discussions experienced better adjustment to university and more gains in social support than did those in the non-intervention group. A third group was omitted from the analyses because delivery of the intervention was compromised for various reasons. Results are discussed with an emphasis on factors influencing the intervention’s effectiveness.

In general, transitions are "periods of change, disequilibrium, and internal conflict about gains and losses that occur between periods of stability, balance, and relative quiescence" (Cowan, 1991, p. 7). Such life changes, while often positive in many ways, also bring with them increased levels of stress as the individual struggles to regain stability in the face of new challenges. One specific transition in later adolescence in our society that has attracted much research is students'
progression from secondary education to university. Like many adolescent developments, it involves changes in both autonomy (Chickering, 1969) and identity (Erikson, 1959, 1963, 1968; Marcia, 1980).

While this transition to university, like others, involves stress, it is distinguished from many other episodes in adolescence by the extent of upheaval in social support networks that it entails. Adolescents undergoing this transition often lose access to the protective environment of the family, and may therefore be vulnerable to increased stress (Baumrind, 1991). The support of others has been shown to protect people from psychological distress arising from stressful life events (Cassel, 1974; Cobb, 1976). Thus, social support networks as resources may serve to "buffer" individuals from the negative effects of stress (e.g., Cohen & Wills, 1985). The transition to university often involves some loss of sources of social support (for example, moving from home, evolving interests different from those of friends), potentially reducing the individual's resources to cope with transition stress (Albert, 1988; Kenny, 1987). As stress increases, aspects of an individual's life may suffer, including the ability to create new friendships and to form a new social support system. Such new social networks, if formed, could serve preventive, as well as adaptive, functions. For example, such social interactions could help incoming students become familiar with the university environment and their role as students (Hays & Oxley, 1986).

Thus a general loss in social support can affect an incoming first-year student's ability to deal with transition stress and to adapt to university. Despite this, individuals with initially greater levels of social support prior to university also have been shown to have a more positive transition experience than those with low initial levels. In a previous short-term longitudinal investigation of the transition to university (Hunsberger, Pancer, Pratt, & Alisat, 1994), more satisfaction with social support (as measured in August prior to university attendance) was a predictor of better adjustment for students at the end of their first academic year in the following March. Specifically, individuals' initial social support levels were positively correlated with subsequent university adjustment and self-esteem, and negatively correlated with later scores for depression, stress, and college hassles.

Up to 40% of students fail to complete their university degrees (Smith, 1991). Also, attrition rates are typically highest during students' first year at university (Levitz & Noel, 1989; McIntosh, Wilson, & Lipinski, 1974). This suggests that many incoming students do not manage to adjust to university, and drop out within their first year. For many students, this solution might have been avoided if the transition to university had been smoother. In response to this difficulty in adjustment to university life, many researchers and university administrations have developed intervention programs designed to facilitate the transition to university (e.g., Baker & Siryk, 1986; Bloom, 1971; Compas, Wagner, Slavin, & Vannatta, 1986). These interventions were based on a variety of models. A number of these studies investigated interventions based on social support (e.g., Birkeland, 1989; Fondacaro, Heller, & Reilly, 1984; Oppenheimer, 1984; Scherer & Wygant, 1982).

Birkeland (1989) developed a multi-faceted program, combining such diverse therapies as Rational Emotive Training, empathy training, and assertiveness training, to target depression, suicide ideation, and feelings of separation from
family in college students undergoing the transition to university. The program was designed to be facilitated by residence hall staff members, who encouraged group cohesiveness and trust. Fourteen women volunteered to meet for sixteen two-hour semi-weekly sessions. The program's effectiveness with students cannot be determined, however, as the lack of any randomly assigned comparison group made it difficult to evaluate the outcome of the program effectively.

Fondacaro et al. (1984) also focused on student depression and suicide ideation. In response to suicide attempts at a high-rise graduate student dormitory, they developed a series of four seminars directed at dormitory leaders, to reduce loneliness among resident students and to promote social interaction. The immediacy and severity of the problem at hand precluded the use of a comparison group. Although there were no reported subsequent suicide attempts during the academic year, no evaluation was performed to determine if loneliness and social interaction were affected by the intervention.

Scherer and Wygant (1982) developed a volunteer summer program, including tutorial services, individual counselling sessions, and planned social activities, for students concerned about their transition to university. Participants showed strong grade point averages following the intervention. However, it was difficult to ascertain what led to this success due to the many aspects of the program, its volunteer nature, and the lack of a comparison group which did not receive an intervention program.

Only one of these social-support-related intervention studies of the transition to university used a comparison group not exposed to the intervention (Oppenheimer, 1984). Oppenheimer pretested 133 volunteer first-year students on life satisfaction, social anxiety, and self-esteem, and placed them into either "vulnerable" or "nonvulnerable" categories, depending on their scores on a social life satisfaction measure. Thirty-nine members of each category were randomly assigned to same-sex groups of four to six members, to participate in a six-week intervention program, whereby they met weekly for one hour, from mid-October to late November. The intervention program focused on problem-solving, open expression of concerns, and group cohesiveness (Oppenheimer, 1984). The remaining 21 participants (34 from the original 133 had dropped out due to the study's time commitment) were not given any treatment. All participants were then given post-test (one week after intervention) and follow-up (five months after intervention) questionnaires on social life satisfaction, social anxiety, anxiety, self-esteem, help seeking, problem seeking, and attributions and expectations about university life. Results showed a significant intervention effect on social adjustment, but only for the "vulnerable" students. Although the study did find some impact on this vulnerable group, intervention effects were, for the most part, non-significant. This finding may have been due in part to the lateness of the intervention (beginning only at mid-term). Although students are typically concerned about their studies during this mid-term period of exams, research has shown they are most vulnerable earlier in the year, during the first several weeks of classes (Compas et al., 1986).

The above review indicates that, for the most part, interventions intended to facilitate the transition to university have shown, at best, only modest success, and have not been well controlled. It is our contention that any intervention focused on
mutual social support, and its evaluation, should follow a number of obvious, but important principles. First, it should involve discussion groups and interactions with other transition participants, and not be limited to individual counselling sessions or lectures. Second, the discussions themselves could usefully focus on the importance of social support in adjusting to university. Increasing the sophistication of students' thinking about and understanding of support and adjustment issues should be beneficial by providing them with more resources for coping. Third, there should be a treatment comparison group in order to adequately assess the effectiveness of the intervention. Finally, the intervention should take place soon after first-year classes have begun, ideally within the first few weeks of classes, when students are most vulnerable to transition stress (Compas et al., 1986).

The present investigation is part of a series of investigations by the authors of the transition to university. It involved a program with the components described above. We implemented a six-week program, focusing on mutual social support, for a group of incoming university students, and assessed the impact of the program on students' short-term adjustment to university and feelings of well-being. For comparison purposes, a randomly assigned control group did not participate in the intervention.

It was hypothesized that after the intervention: (a) participants' posttest scores on social support would be significantly higher than their pretest scores, (b) participants would score significantly higher on a measure of social support than would the non-intervention control group, and (c) participants would score significantly higher on a measure of adjustment to university than would the non-intervention control group. In addition, it was expected that prior to the intervention the two groups would not differ, consistent with random assignment.

METHOD

Participants

An introductory letter and initial questionnaire were mailed to 347 randomly selected incoming undergraduate students at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario. Fifty-five students (35 females; 20 males) volunteered to participate by signing and returning a consent form, and completing the initial questionnaire. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 20 years ($\bar{X}=18.6$). All but eight of these students had moved from their homes to live on campus in September, 1994; six students moved to off-campus housing, while only two students in the sample stayed at home. No honourarium was offered, although students enrolled in introductory psychology courses were accorded two bonus course credit points, consistent with departmental policy regarding participation in research.

Measures

All participants were asked to complete both a pretest questionnaire and a posttest questionnaire. The pretest questionnaire, part of a broader study, included measures of social support and social networks, self-esteem, depression, and stress. Demographic characteristics as well as social consultation about university life and coping style were measured at the time of pretest. Posttest questionnaires
were identical to pretest questionnaires, with the addition of measures of adjustment to university, social consultation about a personal problem, and daily hassles. For participants in the intervention groups, the posttest questionnaire also included an intervention evaluation form. As the variables of interest in this study were social support and adjustment to university, only the measures of perceived social support and adjustment to university, as well as the intervention evaluation, were used in the analyses reported below.

Social support. The 24-item Social Provisions Scale (Cutrona, 1984) was used to assess students’ perceived social support. Participants were asked to indicate agreement or disagreement with each item using a 9-point response format which ranged from -4 (very strongly disagree) to +4 (very strongly agree; 0 = neutral). Six subscales of four items each measured different aspects of social support: attachment (e.g., "I feel a strong emotional bond with at least one other person"), social integration (e.g., "There is no one who shares my interests and concerns"), opportunity for nurturance (e.g., "I feel personally responsible for the well-being of another person"), reassurance of worth (e.g., "I do not think other people respect my skills and abilities"), reliable alliance (e.g., "There are people I can depend on to help me if I really need it"), and guidance (e.g., "There is no one I feel comfortable talking about problems with"). Although this measure includes six subscales, only the overall score was used for this study. Scores for all items were recoded for data analysis into a 1-9 response format. Adjusted total scores could therefore range from 24 to 216, with higher scores indicating greater perceived social support. This measure has reasonable psychometric properties of reliability (test-retest over a six-month period r = .55) and validity (correlations of appropriate sign from .28 to .31 with measures of life satisfaction, loneliness, and depression; Cutrona, 1984).

Adjustment to university. The 67-item Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ; Baker & Siryk, 1984) was used to measure university adjustment. Participants were asked to indicate how well each statement applied to them "at the present time (within the last few days)," using a nine-point response format (1 = doesn’t apply to me at all; 9 = applies very closely to me). The SACQ contains four subscales to measure different dimensions of university adjustment (a few items are double-scored): academic adjustment (24 items; e.g., "Recently I have had trouble concentrating when I try to study"), social adjustment (20 items; e.g., "I feel that I have enough social skills to get along well in the university setting"), personal emotional adjustment (15 items; e.g., "I have been getting angry too easily lately"), and attachment to the school (15 items; e.g., "I expect to stay at this university for a bachelor's degree"). Subscale and overall scores were generated by summing scores on relevant items. Higher scores indicate better university adjustment; overall scores could range from 67 to 603, and subscales could have the following ranges: 24 to 216 for academic adjustment, 20 to 180 for social adjustment, and 15 to 135 for both personal emotional adjustment and attachment. Reliability of the SACQ is high; Cronbach’s alpha was between .92 and .94 for six administrations of the SACQ (Baker & Siryk, 1984). Criterion validity correlations for the SACQ with university attrition rates were consistent and in the low to moderate range (-.13 to -.34) over three years, indicating lower drop-out rates for those with higher scores (Baker & Siryk, 1984).
Intervention Evaluation

The final page of discussion participants' November questionnaire contained an intervention evaluation form. Participants were asked two open-ended questions regarding what benefits they received from the meetings and what changes should be made for future interventions. Also, using a five-point response format (1 = not at all; 3 = moderately; 5 = a great deal), they indicated the extent to which they experienced six benefits as a result of their participation in the group. The six benefits included were: "It helped me realize that I wasn't the only one who was experiencing some of the problems that I faced"; "It gave me a chance to 'unload' some of my problems"; "It helped give me a different perspective on things"; "It gave me ideas about how to balance my academic and social life at university"; "I got to know some people with whom I feel I can talk if I need to"; and "It helped make the transition to university easier for me." Total scores could range from 6 to 30.

PROCEDURE

Pre-Intervention

Prior to contacting the participants, approval was given to the project by a departmental ethics review committee. Early in August, 1994, one month prior to the beginning of classes and the intervention period, students were sent an introductory letter, a consent form, and the August questionnaire by mail. The letter described the purpose of the study and explained that participants would be placed in either a discussion or a questionnaire-only group according to random selection. Interested students were asked to complete and return the questionnaire and consent form within two weeks of receipt.

During this period, two graduate students, one MA graduate, and a senior undergraduate student were trained as facilitators for the discussion groups by faculty members overseeing the project. This training involved information and exercises on active listening, paraphrasing, role-playing, and leading discussions. The facilitators and supervising faculty members also developed the structure of each week's meeting, taking into account information gathered from multiple campus sources, including admissions personnel, counselling services, and the university's student life coordinator. Facilitators participated in mock sessions prior to the actual structured meetings, with faculty members role-playing first-year students. Throughout the intervention, facilitators were encouraged to discuss their concerns with the faculty members involved.

After the August questionnaires and consent forms had been returned, the 55 volunteer participants were contacted by phone to determine their availability for the discussion groups. Within a week, time periods for three group meetings were determined for the discussion groups, and participants were randomly assigned to either a discussion or the questionnaire-only comparison group, with the provision that all groups would be as gender-balanced as possible, and participants would be available for meeting times. All participants were then re-contacted and informed about the group in which they had been placed. Discussion participants were told where and when their first meeting would take place. Questionnaire-only participants were informed about their role in the study. They were not contacted again.
SOCIAL SUPPORT AND TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY

until the November mail-out, in the post-intervention phase, but were given the telephone number of a contact person to call if they had difficulties adjusting to university life, or had questions or concerns about the study. However, no non-intervention participants called during this period.

Intervention

During the first week of classes (mid-September, 1994), each of the three discussion groups had its first meeting. Subsequent meetings were held at the same time and place for the next five weeks. Attendance varied throughout the program between Group 1 (X̄=8.2), Group 2 (X̄=5.3), and Group 3 (X̄=6.8). Group 2’s average attendance was quite low, and only five of their six intervention meetings were held. Also, this group was not fully constituted until Week 2, due to the fact that two members of the group did not attend the first meeting, and had to be replaced. This problem will be discussed later.

Each meeting lasted approximately 90 minutes, and was organized by one male and one female facilitator. The three groups had different pairs of facilitators, whose role was to initiate discussion, keep discussions relatively on-topic, and ensure balanced participation for all group members. With the exception of the first meeting, all meetings began with a 20-minute "check-in" period, giving participants the chance to talk about feelings and concerns from the previous week at university. This was followed by various exercises related to the weekly focus. Also, with the exception of the final meeting, all meetings ended with a 30-minute general discussion on the topics raised during the meeting. All meetings were audio-taped (with the knowledge and consent of participants), so that sessions could be monitored by the researchers as needed.

The format of the meetings was loosely based on the transition to parenthood intervention described by Cowan and Cowan (1992). The format of each meeting is summarized below, and was meant to be flexible and dependent on the group’s interests and needs each week. The "check-in" period generally took priority over any structured exercises.

Week 1. The initial meeting began with two standard icebreakers involving participants and facilitators, which took approximately 30 minutes. Facilitators then briefly explained the rationale for the study, and indicated the importance of following guidelines of respect, equal time, punctuality, and confidentiality within the meetings. The remainder of the first meeting included an orienteering exercise using a projected map of the campus, a brief explanation of topics in the meetings to come, and ended with a general discussion of impressions and expectations of university life, and of the campus orientation experiences so far.

Week 2. The second meeting focused on new social ties. Following the check-in period, participants wrote down the names of people they had met during their first two weeks at university, indicating how and where they had met. Each participant then chose one person from his or her list and briefly talked about what happened when they met. This activity allowed the group to recognize different strategies and locales for meeting people. The general discussion then focused on these and other issues related to meeting new people, such as dating and peer pressures.

173
Week 3. Residential issues were the focus of the third meeting. After check-in, participants wrote down the advantages and disadvantages of their present living situations; facilitators listed these on an overhead. After a comparative discussion on parents and residence dons/supervisors, the general discussion focused on issues related to residential life, including housework, independence, privacy, and other topics mentioned in the brainstorming session.

Week 4. With the exception of check-in, the entire fourth meeting was a general discussion of academic issues, as participants in all groups were concerned about upcoming midterm exams. Facilitators introduced material from university counselling services as an aid to studying, note-taking, and time management. Discussion then focused on such issues as balancing academic and social life, strategies for getting academic help (such as contacting teaching assistants), and grade expectations.

Week 5. At the fifth meeting, check-in was followed by a look at previous social ties. Participants indicated in writing the names of people they had turned to for help with problems in the past. This was followed by a discussion on whether their support networks had changed since starting university, and how to maintain previous ties. The general discussion also touched on these issues, as well as homesickness, holidays, and long-distance relationships.

Week 6. The final session did not focus on any particular aspect of university life. Following a check-in discussion, facilitators reviewed what was discussed in previous weeks, and related this to the study. Participants were asked for their impressions on the meetings. They were then introduced to other members of the research team. This meeting ended with a pizza party.

Immediately after each meeting, facilitators evaluated the delivery, reception, and effectiveness of the materials and discussion for that week. As well, for each activity planned (e.g., check-in, general discussion), the facilitators made detailed notes concerning effectiveness and student response. These evaluations were examined at weekly research team meetings held throughout the intervention phase. Useful ideas or procedures from any of the three groups were incorporated into future discussion meetings. For example, the order and content of activities were considered by the research team, leading to changes in subsequent group sessions.

Post-Intervention

Approximately two weeks after the final discussion meeting (held in late October, 1994), the November questionnaire on social support and adjustment to university was mailed to all participants. Return rate for the intervention groups was 100% for this questionnaire; for the non-intervention group it was 93% (two students dropped out of the study at this point, leaving 15 females and 11 males in the non-intervention group).

RESULTS

Quantitative Analysis

The 27 intervention participants responded to the six intervention benefit items. The responses were generally positive. Total scores ranged from 14 to 27.
SOCIAL SUPPORT AND TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY

(\(\bar{X}=22.52\) [SD = 3.11], possible range was 6 to 30). Participants in Group 2 scored significantly lower on two of the items, "I got to know some people with whom I feel I can talk if I need to," (\(\bar{X}=2.67\)), \(F(2, 21)=5.93, p<.01\), and "It helped make the transition to university easier for me," (\(\bar{X}=3.00\)), \(F(2, 21)=5.27, p<.05\), compared with Groups 1 and 3 (combined \(\bar{X}\)s for these two items = 3.61 and 3.83, respectively). The overall evaluation means for Group 2 were significantly lower than those of Group 1, but not those of Group 3.

Because of initial participant absence in Group 2, lower average weekly attendance, and a missed discussion meeting, the investigators felt that Group 2 did not receive the intervention in the way it was designed. These logistical problems were probably reflected in the fact that this group reported significantly lower scores on some intervention benefits than did Groups 1 and 3. As a result of these problems, Group 2 was removed from the comparative analyses reported below, and only Groups 1 and 3 were compared with the non-intervention group.

**Intervention effects on perceived social support.** A 2 (gender) X 2 (intervention group/non-intervention group) X 2 (time of testing) repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted on the pretest and posttest total social support scores, with time as the within-participants variable, and gender and group as between-participant factors. There was a significant main effect for Gender, \(F(1, 40)=4.51, p<.05\), with females reporting higher levels of perceived social support (\(\bar{X}=192.16, SD=12.08\)) than males (\(\bar{X}=178.35, SD=24.55\)). No significant group or time effects or interactions were found, contrary to Hypothesis 1. However, the lack of any significant group effects or interactions supports the assumption that the intervention and non-intervention groups did not differ in their total social support scores prior to the program, as would be expected based on random assignment.

Although there was no significant difference initially between groups on the Social Provisions total score, there were persisting individual differences within groups, as indicated by a strong pretest/posttest score correlation across the sample, \(r(44)=-.70, p<.001\). As a result, an analysis of covariance was performed on the Social Provisions total score, to examine group differences in October after controlling for the effects of individual variability in August. A 2 (gender) X 2 (group) ANCOVA was carried out on the posttest total score, using pretest total score as a covariate. Although there was no interaction effect, there were significant main effects for both Group, \(F(1, 39)=5.08, p<.05\), and Gender, \(F(1, 39)=5.92, p<.05\). The intervention group had higher posttest levels of perceived social support than did the non-intervention group; adjusted means for groups (controlling for pretest scores) were \(\bar{X}=191.11\) (SD = 11.44) for the intervention group, and \(\bar{X}=182.60\) (SD = 20.22) for the non-intervention group. Females scored significantly higher than males; adjusted means for gender (controlling for pretest scores) were \(\bar{X}=191.50\) (SD = 12.58) for females, and \(\bar{X}=182.21\) (SD = 21.17) for males. The covariate effect was also significant in this analysis, as would be expected based on the substantial correlation reported above, \(F(1, 39)=32.97, p<.001\). Thus, there was support for Hypothesis 2, that social support at posttest would be higher for intervention participants than the comparison group, when pretest social support scores were controlled.
Intervention effects on adjustment to university. To determine the effects of the intervention on university adjustment, separate 2 (gender) X 2 (intervention group/non-intervention group) ANOVAs were conducted on the subscale and total posttest scores of the SACQ. Means and standard deviations are listed in Table 1. There were significant main effects for group on the academic subscale, $F(1, 40) = 5.28$, $p < .05$, and the SACQ total score, $F(1, 40) = 4.44$, $p < .05$. In both cases, the intervention groups demonstrated better adjustment than did the non-intervention group, as hypothesized (see Table 1). There were no significant main effects for gender on any SACQ scores, nor any gender X group interaction effects. Overall, then, Hypothesis 3 was supported by evidence of better university adjustment in the intervention group versus controls.

Qualitative Analyses

All 18 discussion participants in Groups 1 and 3 responded to the open-ended questions in the posttest questionnaire. To the question that asked participants what benefits they had received from the intervention, several points were made by many of the students. Ten students mentioned meeting new people and making friends in the group. Fifteen participants mentioned learning that other people had similar problems, and seven indicated that the meetings gave them the chance to talk about their problems.

Participants did, however, suggest that the intervention might be improved in some ways as well. Nine people wanted more meetings, and two suggested continuing the meetings into the next term. These participants felt that an extended intervention would be more productive in dealing with ongoing stress. As one participant wrote, "Everybody has become very tense and stressed out in the past couple of weeks, and it would have been nice to go somewhere to 'unload.'" Other participants suggested shorter meetings, a more central location, and the option of rescheduling meetings during exam conflicts. One participant indicated satisfaction with the intervention, and offered no suggestions for improvement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Interventiona X</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Non-interventionb X</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F(1, 40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>145.23</td>
<td>(22.90)</td>
<td>128.60</td>
<td>(25.59)</td>
<td>5.28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>137.16</td>
<td>(16.67)</td>
<td>129.47</td>
<td>(17.33)</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal emotional</td>
<td>87.61</td>
<td>(18.63)</td>
<td>85.42</td>
<td>(17.40)</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment</td>
<td>114.34</td>
<td>(12.62)</td>
<td>104.87</td>
<td>(21.44)</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>434.37</td>
<td>(47.16)</td>
<td>400.98</td>
<td>(57.27)</td>
<td>4.44*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Higher scores reflect better adjustment to university. Intervention means are based on Groups 1 and 3 only.

*a n = 18. b n = 26
*p < .05
SOCIAL SUPPORT AND TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY

DISCUSSION

This study examined the effects of a six-week social-support-based intervention program for incoming university students. It was hypothesized that the randomly assigned participants in intervention discussion groups would show gains in their levels of perceived social support compared with the non-intervention controls, and that students participating in the discussions would report more social support and better university adjustment on the posttest than those who did not participate. Results were generally consistent with the last two hypotheses when the two effective intervention groups were compared with the control group, which did not experience the discussions.

Analyses comparing the intervention groups and controls on the posttest revealed significantly higher scores for the discussion participants on both the Social Provisions Scale measuring social support and the SACQ total score measuring university adjustment. The academic adjustment subscale of the SACQ also showed a significant difference in favour of the intervention groups. Thus, the 18 students who participated fully in the intervention reportedly felt a more positive sense of adjustment to university than controls who did not.

Despite the fact that the hypothesized gain over time in social support for the intervention groups from pre- to posttests was not significant in the repeated-measures analysis, there was a modest trend in this direction. As well, the pretest social support total scores on the Social Provisions Scale were already high for the participants (X̄ = 190.81), perhaps leaving only modest opportunity for demonstrating gains on this measure of social support. It may in fact be the case that this intervention is more appropriate for those with less effective initial support networks. However, more systematic research on such a "targeting" issue would be needed to clarify this point. Most importantly, when initial levels of social support were statistically controlled, the participants in our intervention groups did score significantly higher on perceptions of support than did controls.

Overall, then, these results provided some support for the expectation that the intervention would foster a sense of social support, as well as encourage more effective adaptation to university. The pattern of group differences on the SACQ was consistent across all of its four subscales (see Table 1), and the overall difference was significant. We believe such differences in feeling of adjustment at the outset of students' university careers could have important and lasting impact across their university experience. The question of the longer-term impact of this intervention deserves careful study.

These quantitative findings were reinforced by the positive comments students made on the post-discussion group questionnaire and checklist. For example, one participant "learned how to deal with various situations in a productive manner," whereas another discovered "how to blend into university life—socially and academically—which was really important." A third participant described the intervention as "a social support network in its own right, making my transition much easier."

While the results for this support group program are thus encouraging overall, we must acknowledge that there are several important issues of generalizability that
need to be investigated further. This was a volunteer sample, and represents those incoming students most willing to devote 90 minutes of their time per week to such a discussion group experience. Obviously, then, volunteering biases are an important constraint on the interpretation of these results. Follow-up studies with a wider range of participants are needed to address these issues directly.

The fact that most of the participants were staying in residence is important in interpreting the findings as well. Many of these people were living away from home for the first time; in addition to university life, they were also adjusting to independent living. The onset of new responsibilities and freedoms may present as many stressors as the demands specific to university attendance. Further, participants not living in residence may undergo different changes in their social support networks than those who do. For instance, those living at home may have been more likely to maintain old support networks simply because they were more available, and those living off campus may have had a more difficult time developing new social ties. Because most of these first-year students at Wilfrid Laurier University were living in residence (about 85% of our sample), it was not possible to evaluate the role that specific living arrangements play in adjustment to university or development of social ties; however, it would be useful to keep these issues in mind for further research.

Gender differences were also found for the overall Social Provisions score; women scored significantly higher than men on perceived social support across time. Such findings are consistent with previous evidence on gender differences and social support (see Belle, 1987, for a review). In times of stress, women tend to seek out support more than men, and female college students rate other people as more helpful in solving problems than do male students (Belle, 1987). Most important in the present context, however, the lack of any gender-by-group interaction in the analyses suggests that our intervention was effective for both the men and women in our sample.

Observations of the discussions and ongoing problems with participant attendance had also led us to be concerned about the effectiveness of one of our intervention groups. We subsequently re-ran the analyses reported here including Group 2, thus comparing Groups 1, 2, and 3 with the controls. As expected based on these observations, several significant differences between the two effective intervention groups and the control groups were attenuated with the addition of Group 2. Thus, Group 2 was evidently less affected by the intervention overall than the other two discussion groups.

This group had lower attendance than the others, chose to meet fewer times, and required the replacement of two members after the initial meeting. Given the nature of these problems, it seems likely that initial group cohesion is an important factor that should be attended to carefully in order to strengthen the impact of this intervention in facilitating the transition to university.

Future research is needed on interventions such as that utilized in this preliminary study, exploring longer-term effects, and the role of group composition. The results of the present study must be interpreted with caution, given the difficulties in implementation which we experienced. Nevertheless, this study indicates the potential role that a support group can play in the transition to
university. As one discussion participant put it in the intervention evaluation, "I think this is a very positive exercise for first-year students. More students should have the opportunity to participate in organized sessions. I think it would help many people." For these students the present intervention was beneficial to their feelings of adjustment to university, and our study suggests the value of a relatively brief group support program during this important life transition.

NOTES

1. Due to time limitations, based partly on our desire to begin the intervention during the first week of classes, potential participants were asked to sign their consent forms and complete the pretest questionnaire during a brief period in late August. This time constraint inevitably reduced the total number of volunteer participants.

2. This mean is based on just five weekly meetings, since the Week 4 meeting was cancelled at participants’ request because of exams.

3. Each intervention group had the following pair of facilitators: Group 1—F1/M1; Group 2—F1/M2; Group 3—F2/M1. Two facilitators were each in two groups, to provide continuity.

RÉSUMÉ

L’inscription à l’université constitue une importante transition entre l’adolescence et le début de la vie adulte pour beaucoup de gens. Les étudiants doivent souvent quitter la maison pour aller à l’université, ils doivent se faire de nouveaux amis et ils doivent faire face à une charge de travail beaucoup plus exigeante que par le passé. Beaucoup de gens ont de la difficulté à effectuer cette transition, comme en témoigne le haut taux d’abandon (jusqu’à 40%) avant la fin d’un programme d’études. La présente étude évalue l’impact d’un groupe de soutien auprès d’étudiants qui commencent leur première année universitaire. Les étudiants ont assisté à six séances hebdomadaires de 90 minutes chacune qui sont dirigées par deux animateurs (un homme et une femme). Les séances portaient sur des sujets tels que la création d’un nouveau réseau social, la vie en résidence, et l’équilibre entre les exigences scolaires et sociales. Des mesures de soutien social et d’ajustement à la transition ont été administrées à trois groupes de soutien composés de neuf personnes (N=27); les mêmes mesures ont été administrées à un groupe de comparaison de participants assignés au hasard (N=28). Les résultats indiquent que les participants de deux des trois groupes d’intervention ont amélioré leur soutien social dans une plus grande proportion et qu’ils se sont mieux ajustés aux exigences de l’université que les participants n’ayant pas reçu une telle intervention. Le troisième groupe a été écarté de l’analyse parce que l’intervention a été compromise en plusieurs points. La section des résultats porte surtout sur les facteurs qui ont influé sur l’efficacité de l’intervention.

REFERENCES


