

## College Life Project Year 2 Progress Report

### Procedure

In April 2008, two groups of students were sent e-mail invitations to participate in the College Life Project. The first group was composed of high school seniors who had recently decided to attend Villanova and were planning to reside in on-campus housing in the upcoming fall semester. The second group was composed of current Villanova freshmen who resided in on-campus housing. Materials were sent via conventional mail to students who had previously agreed by e-mail to participate in the study. This packet included the NEO questionnaire, which students used to provide self ratings of their personality. The NEO assesses five basic traits that are widely considered to be descriptive of normal adult differences in personality: emotional stability, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. **By the end of July 2008, we received completed study materials from 109 students in the first group (incoming freshmen) and 100 students in the second group (rising sophomores).**

In September 2008, after the start of the semester, parents of these 209 student participants were contacted by conventional mail and invited to participate in the College Life Project. Parents were asked to complete a shorter version of the NEO questionnaire about their child. **By the start of fall break in October, we received completed questionnaires from one or both parents for 150 students** (81 parents in the freshmen group and 69 parents in the sophomore group), which is a 72% response rate.

In March 2009, we contacted the 209 students again and invited them to come to our laboratory to participate in a follow-up phase of the College Life Project. By August 2009, we collected follow-up data from 178 students (91 freshmen, 87 sophomores), which is an impressive 85% return rate. We asked the students invited to our lab to bring a peer with them. All of these peers were roommates and/or friends also attending Villanova whom the student had met since coming to Villanova. In some cases, peers were recruited by mail. **A total of 148 peers completed the short form of the NEO questionnaire about the student** (80 for the freshmen, 68 for the sophomores). Thus, 71% of returning targets had a peer rating of their personality.

### Findings

The first question of interest concerns whether self ratings were stable or changing over the one year period of the study. **The ratings of both freshmen and sophomores changed very little**, which is consistent with modern trait concepts of personality. Another question of great interest to the project is whether the students' self ratings of personality agreed more with ratings by their parents or their peers. **On average, ratings of parents and peers agreed equally well with the self ratings that students made at the first and second assessments.** Parents agreed with the students more than their peers did about the trait of conscientiousness, and

peers agreed with the students more than their parents did about the trait of agreeableness. For all five traits, however, parents offered unique information that peers did not, and likewise, peers offered unique information that parents did not. The next set of questions concerns whether these unique perspectives are useful for predicting adjustment to the challenges of college.

In the follow-up phase, students were asked to complete the NEO questionnaire again as well as the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ). The SACQ asks students to rate how well they feel they are adjusting to three different domains of college life. The Academic domain covers students' perceptions of how difficult coursework is and the challenges of keeping up with the demands of school. The Social domain asks about making new friends and getting involved in groups and activities. The Personal domain assesses the students' level of comfort and satisfaction with their overall college experience.

**The five basic personality traits assessed by the NEO were useful for predicting all three domains of adjustment to college.** In general, self ratings of the five NEO traits by the student were the best predictors of the three SACQ variables, but this is not completely surprising as the student is the one making both reports. The more interesting question is what aspects of adjustment can be predicted by the parent and peer ratings of personality. Previous studies of college adjustment have mostly relied on self ratings, so the ability of these two types of raters to predict such important outcomes is unknown. Self ratings on the NEO by the student himself or herself were most accurate for predicting Personal Adjustment, and this is to be expected given that these internal feelings are most accessible to the self. In the domain of Academic Adjustment, parent ratings of personality were superior to peer ratings for predicting how well the students were coping with the demands from coursework. In the domain of Social Adjustment, however, peer ratings were superior to parent ratings for predicting how well the students were making friends and fitting into the student community on campus.

## Conclusion

From these preliminary findings, we can conclude that personality traits are quite stable over time, even in the face of an important life event like leaving home to attend college. These stable personality traits are important predictors of how well students adjust to their new experiences at college. Finally, ratings by informants (e.g., parents and peers) are useful for supplementing the views of the self. The unique perspectives of parents and peers regarding basic personality traits enhance the prediction of important adjustment outcomes beyond what the student can say about himself or herself. We are looking forward to seeing how well these personality ratings can predict life outcomes during the remainder of the college experience and beyond.

Thank you to everyone who contributed time and energy to the College Life Project. The knowledge we have acquired is largely due to your efforts, and we hope you will help us make further discoveries in the years to come.