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The Impact of Home and College Tension on Grit in First-Generation College Students

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Introduction
First-generation students often experience tension between the lives they live two different worlds: life at home and life at college.

Because of the unique challenges they face, first-generation students tend to display characteristics related to grit in their educational pursuits (O’Neal et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2013). Research shows grit is positively associated with academic achievement (Duckworth et al., 2007; Kannangara et al., 2018; O’Neal et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2013).

If first-generation students tend to display grit in their educational pursuits, then why are they more likely to drop out of college than their non-first-generation peers (Chen & Carroll, 2005)?

Research Question
To what extent do perceived tensions between home and college experiences influence grit in first-generation students?

Methodology
Participants
Participants of this study were required to be an undergraduate student currently enrolled at the University of Dayton. Furthermore, sampling criteria required participants to be identified by the University as a first-generation student.

Sample
During Spring 2019, the total number of first-generation students was 548 and every member of the population was invited via email to participate in the study. Of the 548 individuals, 90 of them completed the survey. Of the 90 individuals, three of them did not meet the criteria to be included in the sample. Therefore, the sample included a total of 87 participants.

Data Collection
Over a four-week period, participants completed an online survey which included an informed consent form and three sections of questions: demographic information, the Grit Scale, and the Home and College Tension Scale.

Data Analysis
A bivariate correlation test was conducted to determine whether or not there was a definitive relationship between grit and perceived tensions of life at home and college experiences for first-generation students.

Table 1 shows there was a very weak negative correlation between the two variables (Pearson Correlation = -0.142). As grit increased in value, tension decreased in value.

The results of this study were not statistically significant (p > .385) which means the correlation in the sample occurred by chance and does not provide enough evidence to assume the correlation exists in the population.

Research Findings
Although first-generation students tend to display grit in their academic pursuits, they are still more likely to dropout of college than their non-first-generation peers (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Moreover, some first-generation students face the challenge of navigating tension between lives in two different worlds, and others do not.

Due to the unique challenges they face, first-generation students who experienced less tension between their lives at home and their lives at college appeared to display more grit than those who experienced more tension between the two worlds.

Conclusion
To provide better support for first-generation students, practitioners need to thoroughly understand the varying circumstances that contribute to students’ academic persistence and success. Any professional who works with first-generation students should initiate conversation and personal reflection about the tension they may experience between the two worlds and how it impacts their experience as a college student.

Based on the results of this study, it is important to note students who report higher levels of tension may need more support from resources other than their parents or family network. Moreover, higher education professionals need to seek opportunities to develop grit in first-generation students, especially those who may lack the level of motivation and desire that is necessary to be successful in the college setting.

Future Research
Researchers continue to explore ways to develop grit in students. Duckworth (2018) suggests grit can be developed by practicing or role modeling a growth mindset: the understanding that personal qualities such as talent and intelligence can be developed through effort (Dweck, 2016). However, there is no research that has been done specifically on grit development in first-generation students. Studies have linked grit and overall achievement in first-generation students, but they do not explore ways to develop grit in this particular population.

With this new knowledge, practitioners can implement strategies to develop grit in students and ultimately increase retention and graduation rates for first-generation college students.

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