

**Title:** Assessing the evolution and nature of college students' coping skills

**Purpose:** In March of 2018, the Rhode Island Senate passed the Sosonowski bill which mandated the University of Rhode Island to increase their efforts preventing student depression and suicide. This study assessed college students' stress triggers, habits regarding coping with stress, and how their coping strategies evolved over time. This knowledge can determine the need for supplemental education on healthy coping skills for students.

**Methods:** Pharmacy and non-pharmacy students at the University of Rhode Island (URI) voluntarily completed an IRB-approved anonymous survey to assess their stress levels and coping skills. First, the survey assessed respondent demographics including age, gender, projected year of graduation and their college at URI. Using a Likert Scale, the survey then asked respondents about their overall stress level, stress triggers, and preferred stress coping methods including substance use with emphasis on how coping methods have changed over the course of their academic careers. The survey asked the participants to describe their coping skills in high school compared to college coping skills and inquired about their access to and utilization of university counseling services. Results were analyzed with a pre-defined alpha level of 5% to determine statistical differences between responses using Wilcoxon rank sum, Fisher's exact test, Pearson's chi-square, and descriptive statistics, as appropriate.

**Results:** 192 (123 pharmacy) students completed the survey. Pharmacy majors had significantly more females than males as compared to non-pharmacy majors ( $p$ -value equals 0.0001), but no differences were seen between respondent groups aged between 18-20 nor 21-23. Pharmacy students reported higher daily stress ( $p$ -value equals 0.0136), stress due to school ( $p$ -value equals 0.0137), and stress due to work ( $p$ -value equals 0.0448), while reporting less stress due to social media ( $p$ -value equals 0.0136). Pharmacy students self-reported less use of prescription stimulants ( $p$ -value equals 0.0084) and marijuana ( $p$ -value less than 0.0001) to cope with stress than non-pharmacy majors, however no differences were found between these populations when asked about any substance use in peers. Overall, female respondents reported higher daily stress ( $p$ -value equals 0.01), stress due to school ( $p$ -value equals 0.032), and stress due to social media ( $p$ -value equals 0.004) while also reporting increased likelihood to cope with stress by talking with friends or family ( $p$ -value equals 0.0001) and eating ( $p$ -value equals 0.004) compared to male respondents. Respondents aged 18-20 years old reported less utilization of counseling services to cope with stress than 21-23 year old students ( $p$ -value equals 0.0164).

**Conclusion:**

Discrepancies exist regarding awareness of coping skills and causes of stress between certain student populations at the University of Rhode Island. These data can be used to tailor the URI Counseling Center's efforts, specifically for their students, by creating targeted education to help students cope with daily stress and reduce sources of stress.