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What Do You Expect? Low Self-Control Predicts College Newcomer Expectations

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Abstract

This article investigates the association between low self-control and college newcomer expectations. Examining data from 294 first-year students, the results suggested that low self-control was statistically associated with social expectations (e.g. Greek life, parties) and not associated with formal student affairs related expectations (e.g. campus activities, clubs) or academic expectations (e.g. taking classes, meeting classmates). Existing research literature identifies several channels through which students' unmet expectations about how college is going to be adversely impacts their academic progress. Institutions may benefit by targeting outreach towards individuals likely to exhibit low self-control, tempering their college newcomer expectations to offer a more realistic preview of their likely lived experience to improve satisfaction and, ultimately, retention.

Keywords. Low self-control, college expectations, self-regulation, perception

1. Introduction

In recent years, non-cognitive individual attributes like grit (Almeida et al., 2019; Vazsonyi et al., 2019), emotional intelligence (Dugan et al., 2014; Goleman, 1995), creativity (Sternberg et al., 2012), realistic self-appraisal and positive self-concept (Sedlacek, 2004) have become increasingly valued as indicators of success in educational environments and in broader society. These personal traits, talents, and characteristics have shifted the attention of key college admissions decision-makers away from cognitive or even technical ability and toward those attributes which support success metrics in other ways. For example, colleges may take into consideration the applicant's time management skills or work ethic when making a selection decision. Likewise, factors like creativity and wisdom have been found to associate with first year student success (Sternberg et al., 2012) and there has been a burgeoning interest in concepts like perseverance and academic mindsets in the college admissions process (Farruggia et al., 2018; Kalsbeek et al., 2013).In considering these non-cognitive qualities, in particular, the concept of self-control has garnered recent attention in relation to significant life outcomes ranging from engagement in deviant behaviors to personal achievement.

Self-control refers to the ability to restrain oneself or to exert control over automatic responses to stimuli (Muraven et al., 1998; Muraven et al., 1999). As such, individuals with low self-control (LSC) have a lesser capacity for self-regulation and tend to be impulsive, have a tendency toward risk-taking, and are short-sighted (Gottfredson &Hirschi, 1990).Self-control is of particular importance in the college environment due to the utter absence of the structure that was omnipresent during the K through 12 school years. Specifically, the ability to self-regulate, defer gratification, and resist impulses permits students to attend classes, pay attention, and study rather than to engage in other potentially more recreational behaviors such as watching television, playing videogames, or spending time on the internet. As such, in educational settings, it is not surprising that low self-control is a consistent predictor of negative outcomes and behaviors such as counterproductive academic behavior (Zettler, 2011), lower grades (Duckworth &Seligman, 2005), substance use (Vazsonyi et al., 2017), school burnout (Seibert et al., 2016), procrastination (Baumeister &Heatherton, 1996),lower levels of retention (Stephenson et al., 2020), as well as academic dishonesty and cheating (de Ridder et al., 2012; Vazsonyiet al., 2017).

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However, though logical to associate a trait like low self-control with negative outcomes or behaviors, it is restrictive to limit examination to those acts of deviance and not to consider other ways in which low self-control impacts individual attitudes and perceptions. In particular, expectations have shown to be a powerful predictor of commitment to an organization, satisfaction, and turnover intention (Gkorzis & Kastritsi, 2017; Robinson, & Glanzer, 2016; Wanous et al., 1992). In newcomers like first year college students, the tendency to inflate or to set unrealistic expectations further exacerbates the chance that those expectations will not be met. As suggested by the disconfirmation of expectations framework (Boulding et al., 1993), the incongruity between expectation and reality further creates dissatisfaction and disengagement. The present research, therefore, examines the relationship between low self-control and expectations that students have of an institution of higher learning. Gaining a fuller understanding of the relationship between self-control and expectations of college freshmen could help administrators to emphasize those particular aspects of university life on which newcomers concentrate and to further anticipate incongruities between expectations and lived experience which has been shown to affect important outcomes such as student academic success and retention (Braxton et al., 1995).

2. Literature Review& Hypotheses

2.1 Why Expectations Matter

Scholars have long explored the influence that expectations have on individual motivations and behaviors. Specifically, expectations – when unmet – have been known to "cause a variety of post-entry adjustment problems" (see meta-analysis by Wanous et al., 1992, p. 288). Aligned with the disconfirmation of expectations framework (Boulding et al., 1993), precollege expectations are compared to lived experiences and used as a benchmark of comparison for satisfaction and quality assessments. In this light, previous studies have revealed that expectations impact satisfaction, commitment, social integration, purpose development, and turnover intentions as well as identification with the organization (Ashforth &Saks, 2000; Braxton et al., 1995; Gkorzis &Kastritsi, 2017; Robinson, & Glanzer, 2016; Wanous et al., 1992).

Additionally, when considering newcomers to an organization, as with college freshmen, this relationship is exacerbated by the nature of perception. This phenomenon is of particular importance as those new to an organization "may have unrealistic expectations" (Gkorezis &Kastritsi, 2017, p. 100) about their impending experiences. These expectations subsequently affect motivation, attitudes, and emotions whereby met expectations yield positive outcomes, while unmet expectations incite reality shock (Gkorezis &Kastritsi, 2017). This is compounded by the fact that expectations generally fail to be congruent with actual lived experiences (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005). For example, Sanders and colleagues (2016) used a performance expectation psychometric scale to predict first year student outcomes. The authors found that expectations among this group had the tendency to be unrealistically inflated. Their results suggest that a "lack of appropriate expectations is likely to impede successful engagement and integration at all levels in the education system" (Sanders et al., 2016, p. 354).

The literature further suggests that newcomers rely on self-control or self-regulatory mechanisms to navigate these experiences of met and unmet expectations. For example, Saks and Ashforth (1996) noted that the capacity to conquer the obstacles of being novice relates to the ability to exercise self-control. Likewise, Taris and colleagues (2006) explain that pre-entry expectations of newcomers influence the individual's decision to devote themselves to a relationship with the entity; a phenomenon that is most consistent with the current nontrivial concerns of retention in higher education and particularly in a college population already at high risk of attrition.

2.2 The Role of Low Self-Control

As was previously noted, self-control – also called self-regulation – refers to the ability to implement willpower or self-restraint (Muraven et al., 1998; Muraven et al., 1999). Scholars commonly differentiate between higher levels and lower levels of self-control such that those individuals having higher self-control achieve positive outcomes such as more academic success (de Ridder et al., 2012; Tangney et al., 2004). Stated differently, there is a statistically meaningful difference between high performing and low performing students on the measure of low self-control (Munt & Merydith, 2012). For example, Duckworth and Seligman (2005) examined eighth grade students over time and determined that self-control was more influential over grades than was intelligence (IQ). The authors also found that those with high self-control outperformed their low self-control counterparts on every academic measure such as grades, SAT scores, and attendance (Duckworth &Seligman, 2005). Similarly, Bolin (2004) in surveying 853 college students across the United States found that there was a statistically significant relationship between low self-control and academic dishonesty which was found to be mediated by student attitude towards dishonesty. To reiterate, these studies show that individuals with low self-control tend to exhibit lower academic performance.

However, in the present study we are examining expectations which are perceptual in nature and require the individual to consider what the impending experiences will potentially be like. Given the established linkages between low self-control and academic outcomes reviewed in the Introductory section of this paper (de Ridder et al, 2012; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Munt & Merydith, 20212), we anticipate that individuals with low self-control may have less of an academic orientation, leading to our first hypothesis:

H1: Low self-control will not associate with academic expectations.

The literature suggests that the association between low self-control and academic performance may be attributable to the tendency of seeking immediate gratification and acting on impulses (Gottfredson &Hirschi, 1990). In this way, low self-control shares similarities with Sedlacek's (2004) assertion of the importance of preference towards long-term over short-term needs for non-cognitive variables that associate with student success. Because low self-control manifests in procrastinating, displaying a preference for physical activity, and engaging in more risk-taking behaviors (Gottfredson &Hirschi, 1990), it is often associated with varied behavioral outcomes. For example, Vazsonyi and colleagues (2017) conducted a multi-national study in America, Hungary, Switzerland, and the Netherlands and found that low self-control accounted for 14% of the variance in school misbehavior across all four countries' sample. Likewise, several studies identified a linkage between low self-control and drinking behaviors (Baker, 2010; Reisig & Pratt, 2011; Vito et al, 2019). Ismail and Zawahren (2017) find that low self-control associates with greater internet addiction among college students. Lastly, other scholars have found statistically significant associations with low self-control and imprudent, lewd, or even violent behaviors (Franklin et al., 2012; Reisig & Pratt, 2011; Reyns et al., 2014). Because individuals with low self-control may be more oriented towards short-term social gratification instead of academic responsibilities, we hypothesize the following:

H2: Low self-control will positively associate with social expectations.

Overall, this manuscript contributes to the extant literature by exploring how low self-control impacts pre-exposure expectations held by college newcomers. Given that much of the literature exploring low self-control examines counterproductive behaviors or deviance, the present study, therefore, is unique in this manner. The results of the present study will provide researchers and college administrators with a better understanding of the types of expectations held by individuals with low self-control which are most at risk of being unmet.

3. Methods

We surveyed first-time incoming first-year students at a university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the US as part of a larger study. Of the 2,702 individuals who received the survey, 318 provided responses (11.8% response rate). The sample was primarily Caucasian (78.9%) and female (76.7%). Of the 318 completed surveys, 24 students did not have reported SAT data so they were not included in the regression analysis.

4. Measures

4.1 Low Self-Control

We used an abbreviated version of the original Grasmick and colleagues (1993) scale to measure low self-control. The measure consisted of eight items that captured general attitudes and perceptions on a five-point Likert-type index ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. For example, the items included the following: "I try to look out for myself first, even if it means making things difficult for other people", "I dislike really hard tasks that stretch my abilities to the limit", "I often act on the spur of the moment without stopping to think", "I like to get out and do things more than I like to read or contemplate ideas", "I frequently try to avoid projects that I know will be difficult", "sometimes I will take a risk just for the fun of it", "I lose my temper pretty easily", and "I often do whatever brings me pleasure here and now, even at the cost of some distant goal". The factor analysis supported the use of a single factor for the eight low self-control questions. More specifically, only the first factor had an eigenvalue greater than 1.0 and, with a cut-off of .30 as the minimum acceptable factor loading (Zeller, Neal, & Groat, 1980), all eight items contributed to the first factor. Lastly, the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was .77.

4.2 Expectations

As part of the larger study, there were nine questions in the original survey that gathered data about respondent expectations. The items focused on the following experiences: meeting new classmates, taking classes, getting to know professors, living in residence halls, parties, on campus activities, athletic events, clubs, and Greek life.

We conducted exploratory factor analysis using principal axis extraction with oblique, promax rotation to account for potential positive correlations across different dimensions of college newcomer expectations. Consistent with the existing literature, we used a cut-off of greater than .30 as the minimum factor loading for a variable to be reported as contributing (Zeller et al., 1980). As shown in Table 1, the results suggested three dimensions to newcomer expectations.

Table 1. Rotated Factor Loadings of Expectation Items

Question Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Meet new classmates	0.305		
Taking classes	0.757		
Getting to know professors	0.708		
Living in residence halls		0.537	
Campus activities		0.589	
Clubs		0.701	
Parties			0.609
Athletic events			0.379
Greek life			0.488

(All factor loadings > 0.30 are shown as per Zeller et al. (1980))

Academic Expectations (Factor 1; Cronbach's = 0.75) related to expectations about meeting new classmates, taking classes, and getting to know professors. Student Affairs Expectations (Factor 2; Cronbach's = 0.74) related to expectations about more structured student affairs related activities such as living in residence halls, campus activities, and clubs. Social Expectations (Factor 3; Cronbach's = 0.63) related to expectations about parties, attending athletic events, and Greek life. Because the results of the factor analysis yielded three expectation variables, two of which focused on social aspects of college, we adjusted hypothesis 2 in the following manner:

H2a: Low self-control will positively associate with student affairs expectations.
H2b: Low self-control will positively associate with social expectations.

While 0.70 often is used as an approximate cut-off for acceptable values of Cronbach's alpha measure of reliability (Nunnally, 1978), it also is recognized that alpha is expected to increase with the number of questions in the scale instrument (Taber, 2017) so exceeding 0.70 is less likely with a three-question scale. Schmitt (1996) notes there is no specific cut-off at which the alpha is acceptable, and that lower alpha value scales can still be useful if they provide meaningful content coverage of some domain and reasonable unidimensionality. Schmitt's criteria is met in this analysis as each of the nine expectations questions only load on one factor with weight greater than 0.30 which supports the view of unidimensionality for each of the three scales (see Table 1), and the alpha values are above, or slightly below, 0.70 for each of the three scales.

4.3 Control Variables

Consistent with other studies in higher education that examine such constructs as perceptions, retention, and performance (e.g. Kalsbeek et al., 2013; Kim, 2015; Sedlacek, 2004), we used a cognitive attribute as a control variable. Because the university in question resides on the east coast of the US, the ACT score is not as frequently collected and, therefore, we instead used combined Standard Aptitude Test (SAT) scores. Additionally, we used demographic characteristics such as gender and race as control variables (see Figure 1).

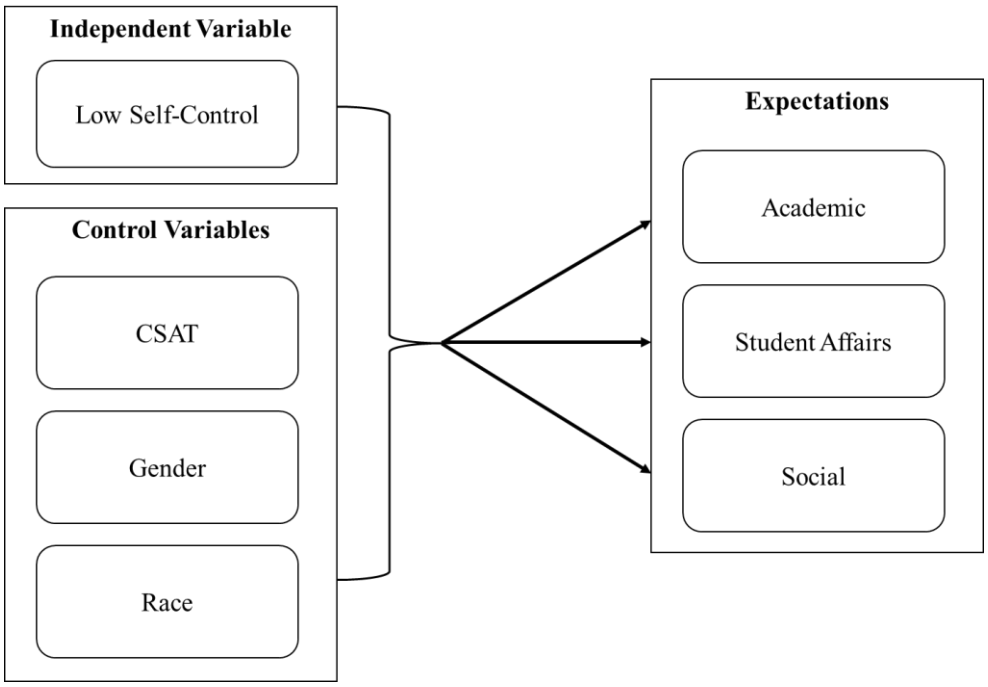

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

5. Analyses

We began by creating the three indexes of newcomer expectations (student affairs expectations, academic expectations, and social expectations) by utilizing two different approaches. We first employed an unweighted additive index by summing responses to the items associated with each factor. Second, we created weighted indexes using the results of the factor analysis. We then conducted ordinary least squares (OLS) multiple regression to examine the relationship between low self-control and subsequent expectations of the institution using both the unweighted and weighted indexes. Three models were estimated for each index type, one for student affairs expectations, one for academic expectations, and one for social expectations. In conducting the regression analysis using both weighted and unweighted indexes, we found no meaningful differences. Therefore, it should be noted that the results reported herein were derived from the unweighted summative index option and that the weighted estimates are not shown.

We ran regression criticism to ensure the robustness of the models. For each of the regressions reported in Table 2, we tested for heteroskedasticity using both the Breusch-Pagan and White tests. For each regression, both tests failed to reject the null hypothesis of homoskedasticity indicating heteroscedastic errors are not a concern. Additionally, we examined the potential for multicollinearity and found the variance inflation factors to all be below 1.20 indicating no multicollinearity problems. As the dependent and independent variables were collected on the same instrument, we run the risk for common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). However, we used several mechanisms to minimize the risk such as using a clear and direct informed consent letter, testing the accessibility of the question language prior to dissemination, and ensuring that the flow of questions did not detract from the respondent's ability to provide accurate responses.

6. Results

Using $p < .05$ cut-offs for statistical significance, the results presented in Table 2reveal that, as hypothesized, low self-control ($p = .09$) failed to associate with academic expectations (supporting H1); however, it should be noted that the overall model was not significant as seen by its F-statistic ($p = 0.38$). Additionally, low self-control ($p = .96$) did not associate with student affairs expectations (failing to support H2a). On the other hand, low self-control strongly associated ($p < .001$) with social expectations (supporting H2b) and the model accounts for approximately 21% of the explained variance. More specifically, a one standard deviation worsening in reported self-control associated with a 0.23 standard deviation rise in students' reported interest in parties, attending athletic events, and Greek life.

Table 2. Regression Analysis of Low Self-control and Newcomer Expectations (N=294)

	Academic Expectations[a]			Student Affairs Expectations[b]			Social Expectations[c]		
	Coef.	P>|t|	Beta	Coef.	P>|t|	Beta	Coef.	P>|t|	Beta
Low Self-Control	-0.034	0.088	-0.104	-0.001	0.963	-0.003	0.129	0.000*	0.228
SATC	-0.001	0.133	-0.104	-0.003	0.003*	-0.185	-0.007	0.000*	-0.325
Male	0.019	0.937	0.005	-0.714	0.02**	-0.132	0.470	0.196	0.069
Caucasian	0.021	0.938	0.005	-0.346	-0.970	-0.057	-0.610	0.140	-0.080

Note – a Adj R2 = .001, F(4, 290), P>F = 0.381, model not significant. b Adj R2 = .054, F(4, 289), P>F = 0.001. c Adj R2=207,F(4,289),P>F=0.000
*p<0.01, **p<0.05

Regarding the control variables, combined SAT strongly and negatively associated with newcomers' social expectations ($p < .001$) with a Beta coefficient of -0.33. Combined SAT also was negative and significantly associated with student affairs expectations ($p = .003$), although the Beta coefficient of 0.19 is notably smaller than in the Social Expectations regression. As the variable Male is a 0/1 dummy equaling one if a male student and zero if female, then the estimated coefficient on the Male variable provides insights into differences between male and female students in their expectations. While males had lower student affairs expectations than females ($p = 0.02$), there was no statistically significant relationship between gender and social expectations ($p = .20$) or academic expectations ($p = .94$). Similar to Male, Caucasian is a 0/1 dummy equal to one if a Caucasian student and 0 otherwise. Caucasian had no statistical association with any of the expectation indexes.

7. Discussion

In this study, we examined the association of low self-control with the various expectations that individuals have of an institution of higher education. As previously noted, individual expectations – whether met or unmet - can have a substantive impact on outcomes such as satisfaction and retention. In college newcomers, this phenomenon is of particular importance because expectations are often high and the transitional period into college is challenging regardless of the potential for experienced reality shocks (Gkorezis & Kastritsi, 2017; Sanders et al., 2016). When navigating the incongruities between expectation and experienced reality, the literature indicates that newcomers will rely on self-regulatory mechanisms (Ashforth & Saks, 2000; Saks & Ashforth, 1996). Individuals with low self-control may struggle to rectify these incompatibilities, however, they also may have had different expectations from the start.

Our results suggest that low self-control primarily associates with social expectations. This result is consistent with the dimensions of low self-control such as preference for physical activity over cognitive activity, minimal tolerance for frustration, desire to seek out risky activities, and need for simple gratification, and having an affinity for impulsivity (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, however, low self-control was not associated with more structured student affairs expectations like living in the residence halls, participating in on-campus activities, and clubs. This may be because students presenting with low self-control may not develop expectations pertaining to the student affairs aspects of college because they are, by nature, somewhat more challenging to anticipate. An alternative explanation is that there may be a neutrality to student affairs related aspects of higher education such that newcomers learn about them most upon arrival and develop perceptions based on actual participation.

Lastly, low self-control failed to associate with academic expectations. Again, this finding is consistent with the literature that explains there is a difference between academically high and low achieving students in terms of low self-control (Munt & Merydith, 2012). In contrast, in the case of our study, we examined the relationship between low self-control and academically associated expectations, and not academic achievement outcomes. The results suggested no association with academic expectations which may indicate that academic expectations are not on the forefront of the minds of those with low self-control in the same way as those socially-driven expectations.

8. Implications for Practice and Student Retention

As a consequence of the aforementioned associations with interest in parties, athletic events, and Greek life, intellectual inducements or motivations maybe less likely to resonate with individuals with low self-control.

Students with low self-control would be more likely to expect college life to include ample opportunities for going to social events, attending athletic events, parties, dances, and joining a Greek organization. Stated

differently, those individuals who have low self-control focus expectations on the fun aspects of university life and not the academic or student affairs aspects.

Consequently, in addition to the better alignment of inducements and motivations, and as suggested by Irving and Montes (2009), universities may benefit by tempering the expectations of college recruits or those joining the entity for the first time as college freshmen. As noted by Braxton and colleagues (1995), colleges and universities need to accurately portray their characteristics to prospective students" (p. 606). Likewise, more recent scholarship has focused on the utility of realistic expectations (Krammer et al., 2016). Offering a realistic preview of the organization during the recruitment efforts and campus visits would align the expectations more accurately with the likely lived experience in an effort to achieve reductions in attrition and improved satisfaction. Consistency should be portrayed in institutional communications such as the website presence, campus tour information, campus tours, and interview experiences. Presenting the "college experience" at open houses and recruiting sessions should include more representative expectations of what college life is like, but while still maintaining the positive appeal of the college environment. This would require an integrated institutional response involving commitment from multiple campus constituencies.

Moreover, more targeted outreach of assistance programs designed to improve retention could take advantage of understanding that lower self-control individuals report establishing higher expectations around athletics and Greek life in particular. While many programs focus on the academic and curricular aspects of student success like first year seminars (Cholewa et al., 2017; Padgett et al., 2013), a more holistic approach could be implemented that addresses academic and social aspects of university life. Key leaders like academic advisors, resident assistants, residence directors, directors of campus activities, and other university personnel should be prepared to mentor incoming students about the expectations of college matriculation and to temper their social expectations accordingly. Similarly, if feasible, colleges could work with local or regional high schools to implement programming designed to introduce college-bound high school students to various facets of the university experience. Similar to the utility of a summer bridge program (Cholewa et al., 2017), colleges can collaborate with high schools to implement programs designed to adequately prepare students for college life including but not limited to appropriately setting expectations. Additionally, the results of our study encourage college administrators to recognize the lesser importance placed by males on residence halls, campus activities, and clubs. At the margin and as a way to positively impact retention, colleges should therefore be mindful of allocating resources to intervention programming that may not resonate with male college newcomers.

In addition to targeted programming, the university, as a whole, may benefit by being sensitive to varying expectations that new students bring to the campus community. Furthermore, encouraging new students to develop accurate assessments regarding how to maintain an appropriate academic-social balance is advised. Developing mentorship programs that stress the importance of having realistic expectations regarding academic-student life-social balance could enhance productivity and boost retention, especially among individuals with low self-control.

9. Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

As with all studies, ours is not without limitations. First, we gathered data from incoming students at one institution of higher education in the US. This suggests that the results, though informative, may be limited in their generalizability. Therefore, future research would benefit by expanding beyond the scope of one organization. Second, the design of the present study was cross sectional in nature. As such, our ability to make causal assertions is restricted. Future studies should gather data across multiple periods of time, beginning prior to exposure and later capturing whether the expectations were, in fact, met. This recommended design would permit scholars to better understanding how expectations either remained or evolved through their lived experience. Third, our study neglected to examine the role of parents in the development of expectations. Parents that have a familiarity with the college experience would have awareness of expectations and could potentially impart them on their children (Harper et al., 2012). Future research should, therefore, consider examining parental influences over the development of college expectations. Fourth, future research would benefit to consider the high school preparation that students receive. For example, the type of high school students attended (e.g. highly competitive, academically well-reputed v. less rigorous) and the kind of advising they received from their high school guidance counselor. Perhaps a particular model of high school advisement impacts the expectations students have upon entering college. In spite of these limitations, it is maintained that the present study contributes to the greater understanding of the relationship between low self-control and expectations held of an institution of higher education.

10. Conclusion

This study highlighted the utility of low self-control as an important determinant of social expectations that individuals develop as they come into institutions of higher education. Research shows that individual expectations are often not commensurate with later realities and that realistic expectations are more predictive of success in organizations (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005). Consequently, identifying effective methods to help students, with or without low self-control, develop realistic expectations of college life is critical to ensuring their later successes.

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