

# Exploring College Students' Experiences Drawing a Journey Map

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**Abstract:** *This study explored college students' experiences drawing an educational journey map. The stories revealed students' educational experiences from freshmen to junior/senior years. Five themes emerged through semi-structured interview questions. Through the students' stories about their educational experiences, researchers could better understand students' daily life, joyful moments, challenges, resilience, and wishful messages to their professors and university administrators.*

**Keywords:** college students, educational experiences, journey map, joyful moments, challenges

## RELEVANT BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

A journey map is an innovative visualization tool that can provide an overview of a person's life or learning process in life span development (Wiley, 2020). Drawing an educational journey map while thinking of accumulated college experiences allows students to share enjoyable moments and their struggles in higher education. The map also provides opportunities for students to present ideas to improve college life that can be shared with administrators and professors. Many research studies support the notion that active social relationships with peers and faculty members benefit college students' learning and development and lead to increased psychological well-being (Moeller & Seehuus, 2019). In this study, we explore college students' experiences by having them draw journey maps. Although researchers have addressed the benefits of using a journey map to review college students' positive and negative experiences and provide suggestions for upcoming freshmen, not many studies like this have been explored in small colleges (Wiley, 2020).

## METHODOLOGY

Educational journey maps are shown to be an effective description of the lived experiences of college students. Mapping or charting provides extra information so that people can understand the context of the educational journey connecting students' previous memories and current situation (Wiley, 2020). In this study, researchers provided five questions that participants could think of in regard to their typical college days and draw on their academic journey maps. Researchers showed and read the five questions to help participants to remember their college

experiences while drawing their educational journey maps. In detail, participants were encouraged to draw their academic journey map from freshman to junior/senior years. They were allowed to use any arrow signs, shapes, numbers, and a single form of the human figure to share their life experiences by thinking about the following questions: (1) What does your typical college life look like?; (2) What has been your greatest joy or happiness through each semester?; (3) What challenges have you faced?; (4) How could you overcome challenges or struggles, and (5) What do you wish the professors, advisors, and university to know about your college experiences? Students reflected on positive and negative college experiences and shared a solution to resolve conflicts and balance their work and school life. We explored the lived experiences of students pursuing higher education at a small college in the Southwestern US. Data was analyzed and themes emerged from how personal experiences and backgrounds influenced the pursuit of higher education.

### ***PARTICIPANTS***

All participants responded to demographic questions before interviews. Researchers collected and analyzed data using open coding (Berg & Lune, 2012). A total of 23 (6 male and 17 female) college junior (12) and senior (11) students participated. Most participants were White (78.3 %) except for two who identified as American Indians, one Latino/Hispanic, and one multi-mixed ethnicity. Most participants ranged in age from 18-25 (82.6 %). There were 14 first-generation students (60.9 %) and three students out of 23 were parents. Students noted they received academic help from professors (43.5%), self-search (34.8 %), parents (17.4 %), and academic advisors (4.3%).

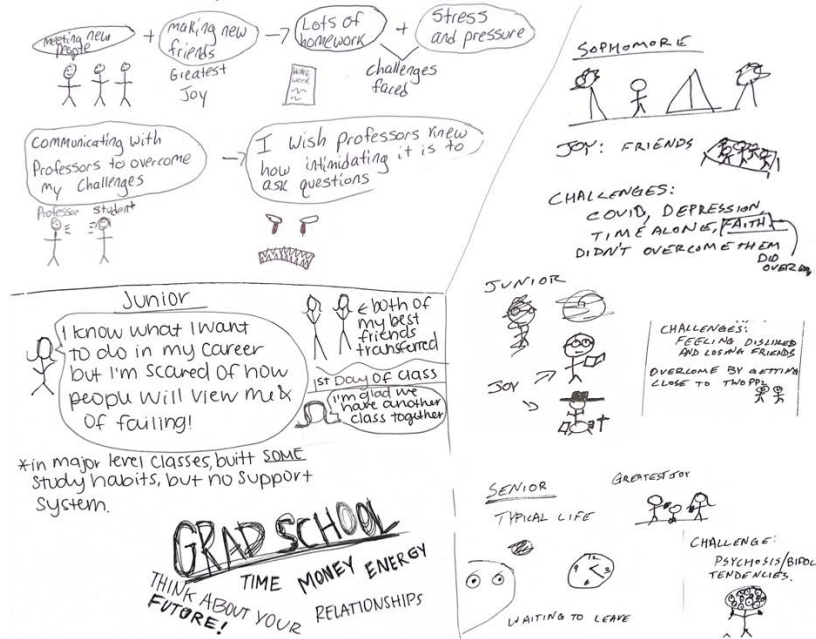
### ***ANALYSIS OF DATA***

First, each researcher examined each student's educational journey map and noted common and unique drawings or words related to interview questions. Next, they read interview transcripts using open coding to find common and unique themes alone. After finding common and unique themes alone, researchers met to share their findings and analyzed recurring themes according to the five interview questions: 1) typical day, 2) joyful moments, 3) challenges, 4) overcoming challenges, and 5) suggestions to the professors and administrators. They continued until they agreed on recurrent common and unique themes. Researchers chose 5-6 educational journey maps that they felt best represented the five interview questions.

## **FINDINGS**

During the interviews, participants were asked to draw a journey map showing the process of a student's education in chronological order. Students included information related to peers, students' organizations & clubs, community, obstacles, joyful moments, challenges, and opportunities from past to present.

**Figure 1**  
*Educational Journey Map*



**TYPICAL COLLEGE LIFE**

College students described their typical day as an exercise in juggling: overwhelming, and stressful. They tried to manage their tight schedule with color coding and a time clock. For commuters, driving was one of their stressful routines and time-consuming process.

I just felt like pretty confused...I was afraid I would be overwhelmed. And I was pretty anxious about that I wouldn't be good enough because that was kind of like a thing. I was afraid I would be overwhelmed. So, I underestimated myself (S., female Junior student).

My typical college life day is juggling classes and appointments...and it starts at like six in the morning and doesn't end till about 10:00 in the evening (Judd, male junior student).

**GREATEST JOY DURING COLLEGE**

Students shared their joyful moments, drawing social gatherings and connections through clubs, organizations, events, and family. They mentioned joining student clubs, meeting a boyfriend who has a similar academic goal and presenting at conferences as joyful moments. In addition, presenting academic works such as research papers or talk presentation through the conference was challenging but rewarding and memorable for each student.

I joined a student theatre organization on our campus and that's been amazing. They are like a little great community...I actually ended up becoming the president of student theatre (Sam female senior student).

**CHALLENGES DURING COLLEGE**

College students identified the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the most challenging moments. Students who suffered from psychological disorders, such as depression and anxiety before COVID-19 became worse. Some experienced the loss of family members, close friends, and neighbors during the pandemic, which influenced their academic motivation and relationships with other students, professors, and school administrators. In addition, 30-minute trips to school and a lack of computer proficiency were barriers since online was the major course delivery method during the pandemic.

COVID 19 pandemic was a big challenge...the teaching from at home was difficult...just the stress anxiety (Cali, male senior student).

Technology, it's kind of a big, bigger issue for me. I am an older student. I didn't learn all this stuff in high school...I need more time to figure it out those things (Berakah, female senior student).

### **OVERCOMING CHALLENGES**

Having a close relationship with professors, friends, and family appeared to be a key to overcoming students' challenges. Having personal faith in God also helped students to overcome their challenges and struggles. Overall, maintaining a proper balance between studying as a part-time/full-time student, working as a part-time/full-time worker, and dealing with relationships with other students, friends, and family members was central to success.

So, I had my close friends, girlfriend, family, I've had all of them even hold myself accountable and asked me questions every now and then like, am I doing my work? Or how am I doing? Am I just scraping by and feel like having to say no or I'm not doing my work to those questions is very disappointing to them and to myself and so it's not a good feeling when I have to answer those questions (Ty, a junior female student).

### **WISHES TO THE PROFESSORS OR ADMINISTRATORS**

Although most students liked and appreciated professors, students mentioned room for improvement. Students wished there would be a class or seminar on time management to attend. Commuters wished there was a place to hang out to have lunch, do homework, or spend time between classes. In addition, several non-traditional students mentioned the difficulties of learning new technology and completing their assignments. They wished professors understood their situations and provided them with step-by-step guidance for essential computer skills to finish their homework. Last, some of the students mentioned the importance of academic advisors. They wished their academic advisors could guide them better and know the next step after graduation to help their future path.

I'm a commuter and I just come to library a lot. It'd be valuable if there were an actual place people could go, specifically and then people could build those relationships and have the time (Stormy, a senior female student).

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study allowed students to share their feelings, thoughts, and experiences through drawing in a unique manner. As instructors, we may need to build both the bottom-up approach using step-by-step instruction and foundational knowledge and top-down approach promoting abstract thinking and critical thinking to help our students to achieve their academic learning and development. In addition, instructors need to encourage non-traditional and first-generation students to reach out to professors and administrators.

Some students came to the university with self-doubt and a sense of personal incompetence based on their previous academic experiences. Students may feel overwhelmed and underestimate themselves when they start their educational journey at a college. As instructors, we need to consider each student's unique situation.

The results of this study indicate social engagement with other students provides joyful moments and happiness during college. Experiencing loneliness may lead to social isolation as well as depression and anxiety. Improving students' social skills may reduce the mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Moeller & Seehuus, 2019). Finally, the findings of the study added unique perspectives on students' positive and negative experiences in a small, local college supporting previous studies that students may get professional help for their future careers and job directions from professors or college administrators (Roberts, 2018).

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