Research indicates that a college education has many personal benefits for lifetime earnings, professional mobility, health, and improved quality of life for oneself and one’s family, and social benefits such as increased productivity and tax revenue, and decreased reliance on government support (Porter, 2002). Furthermore, a college education can greatly enhance a person’s potential contribution to solving social problems and improving the quality of life for others. Yet, obtaining a college education requires an enormous investment of time and resources; tuition and fees at a private college in the United States can range up to $40,000 per year. Tuition and fees paid by students and their families represent only a portion of the actual cost of providing a college education, however. Contributions from governments, institutions, philanthropic foundations, and other sources make up the difference.

In light of the tremendous investment of financial, social, and human capital in higher education and the significant payoffs of a college education for individuals and society, stakeholders including educational institutions, students, and their families have an incentive to ensure that students
who enter college successfully complete their education. About 50% of college students at four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. graduate within five years; about 74% of freshmen return for their second year (ACT, 2002).

In this chapter, we explore personal qualities of students that affect their experiences and outcomes in the first semester of college. Although many factors, from financial resources to academic preparation, influence retention and graduation rates, we suggest that the types of goals students have in their first semester of college predict how successfully they adjust to college. Specifically, we examine the consequences of *egosystem goals* focused on protecting and enhancing self-images, and *ecosystem goals* focused on creating supportive relationships and environments. We describe a study of how these two types of goals predict relationship, learning, and mental health outcomes of college freshmen at a large, selective, public university. The results of our study indicate that when students have the goal to construct, protect, and enhance desired images of themselves, they undermine their social support, learning, and well-being. Ironically, when students focus on giving support to others, their own social support, learning, and well-being improve.

### THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

For many students, going away to college means being on their own for the first time; this new freedom can be both exciting and challenging. College students must negotiate new roles and responsibilities, manage more rigorous coursework, and develop and maintain new friendships. Not surprisingly, college freshmen experience increased stress, vulnerability to mental illness (Beck, Taylor, & Robbins, 2003; Dyson & Renk, 2006), and risky behaviors such as binge drinking and drug abuse (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, 2007). Although most students encounter a few bumps in the road, some students negotiate these challenges more successfully than others, adjusting well. Many factors influence adjustment, including parental support (Mounts, Valentiner, Anderson, & Boswell, 2006) and type of living environment (Enochs & Roland, 2006). Personality traits such as perfectionism (Rice, Leever, Christopher, & Porter, 2006), attachment style (Lopez & Gormley, 2002), and emotional stability (Lidy & Kahn, 2006) also contribute to college adjustment.

We propose that students’ goals also influence their adjustment to college. Because goals are malleable and often controllable, goals provide an interesting potential point of intervention to improve adjustment to college. Although people may have relatively stable chronic goal orientations, goals change more readily than personality traits or cognitive styles; labora-
Egosystem and Ecosystem Goals and Adjustment to College

Laboratory experiments show that goals can shift quickly in response to events, thoughts, or subliminal stimuli (e.g., Gollwitzer & Bargh, 2005; Harackiewicz, Durik, & Barron, 2005). Although goals are often activated outside of conscious awareness, people may also consciously choose the goals they wish to pursue.

**EGOSYSTEM GOALS**

We use the term egosystem goals to refer to the broad range of self-oriented goals related to constructing, maintaining, enhancing, and defending self-images. Previous research has extensively documented the motivation to construct desired images of the self (e.g., Steele, 1988; Tesser, Crepaz, Collins, Cornell, & Beach, 2000). Egosystem motivation involves preoccupation with the worth and value of the self and concern with proving one’s value to others in order to gain social approval and acceptance, or other social outcomes such as power and status. For example, a premed student may have the goal to demonstrate his intelligence. Confused by new material presented in his biology class, he may wonder what this means about him. “Maybe I’m not really that smart,” he may think, “I shouldn’t be in this class.” He may look around at his classmates, who all seem to understand the material, and try to think of something intelligent to say so that no one suspects his confusion.

Of course, egosystem goals can take many forms, and may manifest themselves quite differently across individuals and across contexts. One student might focus on outperforming her peers, whereas another might worry about not appearing stupid. One partygoer might seek validation that he is attractive, whereas another might be focused on appearing funny. All forms of egosystem motivation share an emphasis on self-image and self-worth, often to the exclusion of the needs of others or the long-term interests of the self.

**ECOSYSTEM GOALS**

Analogous to a biological ecosystem, people with ecosystem goals view themselves and others as “a system of individuals whose actions have consequences for others, with repercussions for the entire system” (Crocker, Nuer, Olivier, & Cohen, 2006, p. 48). We use the term ecosystem to refer to motivation focused on what one wants to give, contribute, or create for others and for the self. For example, instead of focusing on what his confusion means about him, the premed student might ask himself, “How can I help others and myself in this situation?” He might want to support others as he tries to understand the material himself.
Popular belief, and a great deal of psychological theory, assumes that self-interest underlies helpful behavior (Batson, Dyck, Brandt, & Batson, 1988). However, accumulating research suggests that people have the capacity to care about the well-being of others, feel compassion, and be genuinely supportive, regardless of consequences for their self-image (Batson et al., 1988; Brown & Brown, 2006; Kernis, Brown, & Brody, in press). Although people may behave supportively for selfish reasons (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney & Collins, 2003; Helgeson, 1994; Ryan & Connell, 1989), they may also simply want to support others because they genuinely care about the well-being of the other person (Brown & Brown, 2006), because the needs of the other person are salient (Batson et al., 1988; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney & Collins, 2003), or because they have a communal relationship with the other person, in which responsiveness is not contingent on perceived benefits to the self (Mills & Clark, 1994).

Both egosystem and ecosystem goals have qualities of both a trait and a state. In other words, people differ in their chronic tendency to have egosystem and ecosystem goals, and within individuals, egosystem and ecosystem goals can fluctuate in response to circumstances and events. Furthermore, these goals may coexist. The premed student might want to appear smart and may also genuinely want to support others. However, in a specific situation, one goal may take precedence. For example, a student deciding whether or not to raise his hand and ask a question may have to choose between protecting his self-image and supporting his and his classmates’ learning.

**ZERO-SUM BELIEFS**

Egosystem and ecosystem goals arise from distinct ways of conceiving the relationship between the self and others, and the resources available to the self. Egosystem goals may arise from a sense of scarcity, leading to the goal to prove that one is worthy and deserving—and more worthy and deserving than others. Thus, egosystem goals have a zero-sum quality; others’ success may be perceived as a threat to one’s self-image. Ecosystem goals, in contrast, tend to arise from a sense that people’s needs are interconnected and can be met synergistically (e.g., when people offer emotional support to others, they increase the support available to themselves; when people support others to learn and grow, they create an environment that supports their own learning). From this perspective, social outcomes such as love, respect, or appreciation are not limited resources that must be won or obtained: rather, people create them by giving them to others. By supporting others’ well-being and success, people create mutually supportive environments, sustaining their own well-being.
CONSEQUENCES OF EGOSYSTEM AND ECOSYSTEM GOALS

We propose that egosystem goals undermine relationships, decrease well-being, and impede learning, whereas ecosystem goals build social support, improve well-being, and promote learning. Egosystem goals may undermine successful adjustment by creating a sense of competition and isolation, and by emphasizing academic performance over learning. Ecosystem goals, by contrast, may promote successful adjustment by creating a sense of connection with others, building social support, and locating the importance of learning within the broader context of contribution.

Relationships

One might expect that projecting a positive self-image would convince others that one is worthy of esteem and support, and thus increase feelings of closeness and satisfaction with the relationship. We argue that, in reality, constructing desired images does just the opposite. Preoccupation with getting validation, approval, or respect from others may prevent people from providing support when others need it most, and discourage others from providing support. Furthermore, egosystem goals may undermine trust and closeness when people view others as threats to the self. When people want to support others because they genuinely care about others’ well-being, they create more trusting and supportive relationships with others. Thus, we expected that having the goal to provide support to others fosters feelings of closeness and trust, and perceptions that support is available, whereas having the goal to construct desired images would lead to feelings of loneliness, and decreased perceived support and trust.

Well-Being

We propose that ecosystem motivation increases well-being, whereas egosystem motivation decreases well-being. Ecosystem motivation occurs in a non-zero-sum framework, where one’s own welfare is intricately tied to the welfare of others, and thus, one’s own well-being does not come at the expense of others. Rather, supporting the well-being of others may be a more effective and sustainable way to meet one’s own needs for connection and thus enhance one’s own well-being.

Egosystem motivation, by contrast, should decrease well-being. Egosystem motivation occurs in a zero-sum framework, in which receiving validation may come at the expense of others’ success, creating competition
and disconnection that may in turn lead to decreased well-being. In other words, the goal to construct desired self-images in order to enhance one’s own well-being might actually undermine well-being by creating competition, eroding support, and compromising needs for social connection. For example, a student intent on proving her intelligence may view others’ success as threatening to her own, and she may thus hesitate to help her classmates when they are confused, for fear that her grades may suffer as a result. In addition to feeling stress and anxiety about her performance, she may inadvertently undermine the potential for connecting with her classmates, leaving her feeling alone and depressed.

Thus, we expected that having the goal to provide support to others builds support for the self, which in turn enhances well-being and reduces symptoms of depression, whereas having egosystem goals erodes social support and undermines well-being and mental health.

Learning

We propose that approaching academic tasks with egosystem motivation can undermine learning. The desire to construct, maintain, and enhance competent self-images motivates people to validate their self-image of competence by seeking success and avoiding failure (Grant & Dweck, 2003). However, we argue that constructing a competent self-image is a fragile source of motivation that does not sustain learning, especially in the context of high academic challenges. Learning requires people to expand their ability beyond what they already know, seek challenges despite risks of failure, admit that they have weaknesses, and take advantage of failures and setbacks as learning opportunities. Yet, when people have egosystem goals, they may prioritize appearing competent, even at the detriment of learning. Thus, we expected egosystem goals to foster the goal to demonstrate competence, but not the actual learning experience, such as asking questions in class.

Ecosystem motivation, by contrast, should encourage learning even in the face of challenges and setbacks. If the premed student wants to be an effective doctor someday, he needs to ask questions in his class, even if this means he might appear unintelligent. He also needs to learn from failure and address his limitations if he wants to better support others. In the ecosystem, people may see failure as a learning opportunity, instead of a threat to the self. Thus, we expected ecosystem goals to promote deeper and more resilient learning orientations than egosystem goals.

How might a premed student’s goals undermine or aid his adjustment? When he has an egosystem goal, he wants to be seen as intelligent. To demonstrate his intelligence, he may refrain from asking questions when he
needs help, ruminate over what his confusion means about him instead of listening to the teacher’s lecture (which could include helpful information), or even hesitate to help his classmates when he does understand the material because this might give his peers an advantage over him in the “rat race” of academic success. In doing so, he may successfully convince his classmates and his professor that he is intelligent, and as a result, he may get a strong letter of recommendation or an offer of a research assistantship. However, his competitive orientation may erode the support around him, he may feel frequent stress and anxiety about performance, and he may fail to deeply learn the course material (Grant & Dweck, 2003).

In our example, the premed student with an ecosystem goal wants to support his and his classmates’ learning. To do this, he raises his hand in class to ask for clarification about an issue that confuses him. In doing so, he may appear confused or unintelligent, but he may also deepen his and his classmates’ understanding of the material and make the classroom safer for expressing confusion, and thus for learning.

In sum, we propose that egosystem goals have costs to relationships, well-being, and learning that may adversely affect students’ adjustment to college, whereas ecosystem goals benefit relationships, well-being, and learning, fostering a more successful adjustment.

THE GOALS AND ADJUSTMENT TO COLLEGE STUDY

To test our hypothesis that goals influence adjustment to college, we conducted a longitudinal study of incoming college freshman in their first semester of college. Each week, we assessed goals in two important domains: academics and friendships. For academic egosystem and ecosystem goals, participants responded to 16 items beginning with the phrase, “In the past week, in the area of academics, how much did you want to or try to”: followed by nine items reflecting egosystem goals (avoid showing your weaknesses; avoid being wrong; avoid appearing ignorant, incompetent, or unintelligent; avoid being criticized by others; get others to recognize or acknowledge your intelligence; convince others that you are right; avoid taking risks or making mistakes; do things you knew you could succeed at; and do things that feel safe and comfortable) and seven items reflecting ecosystem goals (be constructive in your comments to others; avoid doing anything that would be harmful to others; avoid being selfish or self-centered; have compassion for others’ mistakes and weaknesses; be supportive of others; avoid doing things that aren’t helpful to you or others; make a positive difference in someone else’s life). The friendship egosystem and ecosystem goals items were similar, except that the wordings slightly dif-
ferred and had only six items (instead of nine) for the egosystem goals. Participants responded on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely).

We also assessed weekly closeness, loneliness, well-being, depressed mood, and academic self-regulation, growth goals and learning behaviors. We assessed perceived available social support, well-being, and academic achievement goals early in the first semester, and again at the end of the semester. This design allowed us to test whether students who were chronically high in ecosystem goals and low in egosystem goals experienced increases in perceived social support, trust, well-being, and symptoms of depression and anxiety over the course of the semester, and also whether week-to-week fluctuations in goals predicted fluctuations in closeness, loneliness, well-being, depressed mood, academic self-regulation, and learning behaviors.

We expected that students’ chronic goal orientations would affect their relationships, well-being, and learning. In the social domain, we predicted that egosystem goals focused on constructing desired images of the self undermine closeness, trust, and social support, whereas ecosystem goals focused on supporting others build social support and increase closeness and connection with others. Because social connection and support are central to well-being (Monroe, Imhoff, Wise, & Harris, 1983; Windle, 1992), we predicted that egosystem goals undermine well-being and mental health by eroding social support, and that ecosystem goals increase well-being by building social support. Specifically, we predicted that chronic egosystem goals increase depressive symptoms during the first semester of college, and that ecosystem goals prevent or reduce depressive symptoms. Finally, in the academic domain, we expected that egosystem goals undermine learning by emphasizing performance and self-validation over taking the kinds of risks necessary to expand one’s capacities. Ecosystem goals should promote better academic self-regulation and allow students to learn from failure by placing the importance of learning in the larger context of what one wants to create for others, not just what one seeks to prove about oneself.

**EGOSYSTEM AND ECOSYSTEM GOALS IN THE SOCIAL DOMAIN**

As expected, students who approached interpersonal relationships with higher ecosystem goals experienced feelings of closeness ($\beta = .72, p < .001$), increased social support ($\beta = .47, p < .001$), and increased interpersonal trust ($\beta = .26, p < .001$; Crocker & Canevello, 2007). Egosystem goals undermined these benefits of ecosystem goals. When we examined changes in perceived available social support over the semester (posttest support controlling for pretest support) in regression analyses, egosystem and ecosystem goals interacted (see Figures 10.1a and 10.1b). For students low in
Figure 10.1 Ecosystem goals predicting residual posttest social support from friends (a), social support from significant others (b), trust (c), closeness (d), and loneliness (e) at higher and lower levels of egosystem goals.

Note: Means are plotted at 1 SD above and 1 SD below the mean for egosystem goals and ecosystem goals. All analyses control for gender, social desirability, and the corresponding pretest variable.
chronic egosystem goals, ecosystem goals predicted increased social support from friends ($\beta = .41, p < .001$) and significant others ($\beta = .26, p < .001$). For participants high in chronic egosystem goals, ecosystem goals did not significantly predict increased social support from friends or significant others ($\beta$s < .10, n.s.).

Similarly, when we examined changes in interpersonal trust over the first semester of college, we found an interaction between egosystem and ecosystem goals (see Figure 10.1c). For students low in egosystem goals, ecosystem goals significantly predicted increases in trust from pretest to posttest ($\beta = .41, p < .001$); for participants high in egosystem goals, ecosystem goals did not significantly predict changes in trust ($\beta = .08, n.s.$).

As expected, ecosystem goals fostered feelings of closeness with others, whereas egosystem goals foster loneliness. Students reporting higher chronic ecosystem goals reported more feelings of closeness across the 10 weekly reports ($\beta = .72, p < .001$), and students reporting higher chronic egosystem goals reported more feelings of loneliness across the 10 weekly reports ($\beta = .45, p < .001$). Once again, egosystem and ecosystem goals interacted to predict feelings of closeness and loneliness (see Figures 10.1d and 10.1e). Ecosystem goals were associated with closeness at both high and low levels of egosystem goals, but the effect of ecosystem goals on closeness was stronger for students who were low ($\beta = .71, p < .001$) rather than high in egosystem goals ($\beta = .48, p < .001$). Chronic ecosystem goals were associated with less loneliness for students high in egosystem goals ($\beta = -.43, p < .01$), but the effect of ecosystem goals on loneliness was only marginally significant for students who were low in egosystem goals ($\beta = -.16, p < .06$).

Finally, using Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM), we examined whether changes in egosystem and ecosystem goals from week to week (around each student’s own average) predicted changes in their reports of closeness and loneliness that week. The previous analyses established that chronic ecosystem goals predicted greater closeness over the first semester of college, whereas chronic egosystem goals predicted greater loneliness. However, because the effects of chronic individual differences in the goals are statistically independent of the effects of changes in goals within participants from week to week, the preceding analyses do not address whether increases in ecosystem or egosystem goals from week to week predict increased closeness or loneliness in those weeks. In HLM analyses, we investigated the within-person effects of changes in ecosystem and ecosystem goals on changes in closeness and loneliness. As expected, when students were higher in ecosystem goals in a given week, they felt closer to others ($\beta = .33, p < .001$) and less lonely that week ($\beta = -.21, p < .001$), relative to their own baselines. When students were higher in egosystem goals in a given week, they felt lonelier that week ($\beta = .24, p < .001$), relative to their own baselines.
Taken together, these findings provide support for the hypothesis that ecosystem goals promote supportive relationships, whereas egosystem goals undermine relationships. In sum, when we examined changes from the beginning to the end of the first semester of college, a combination of higher ecosystem and lower egosystem goals was most beneficial to interpersonal relationships. Students who chronically had high ecosystem goals and low egosystem goals showed the largest increases in perceptions of social support and trust across the semester. Students higher in both egosystem and ecosystem goals did not show the same increases in perceived available social support or trust, perhaps because fostering trusting, supportive bonds often requires risking being emotionally vulnerable, or being firm, which may mean forgoing desired self-images. These findings indicate that egosystem goals undermine the benefits that ecosystem goals have for social support.

**EGOSYSTEM AND ECOSYSTEM GOALS AND WELL-BEING**

Findings from the Goals and Adjustment to College study support the hypothesis that ecosystem goals enhance well-being, whereas egosystem goals diminish well-being (Crocker, Breines, Denning, & Luhtanen, 2006). Students high in chronic ecosystem goals were also higher in chronic well-being ($\beta = .26, p < .01$); they experienced more vitality ($\beta = .42, p < .001$), had higher self-esteem ($\beta = .35, p < .001$), and felt more “present” and engaged in their first semester of college ($\beta = .21, p < .05$). Students high in chronic egosystem goals, by contrast, were lower in well-being ($\beta = -.37, p < .001$). Furthermore, when we used HLM to examine whether changes in egosystem and ecosystem goals from week to week (around each student’s own average) predicted changes in their reports of well-being from week to week, we found higher well-being on weeks students were high, relative to their own baselines, in ecosystem goals ($\beta = .08, p < .001$). Within-person changes in egosystem goals were not associated with changes in well-being, but were associated with decreased reports of feeling “present” ($\beta = -.09, p < .003$).

Egosystem and ecosystem goals also had implications for mental health (Crocker, Breines, & Flynn, 2007). Students high in chronic egosystem goals became more depressed ($\beta = .22, p = .007$) and anxious ($\beta = .26, p < .01$) over the first semester of college, whereas students high in chronic ecosystem goals became less depressed ($\beta = -.29, p < .001$). Furthermore, HLM analyses showed that week to week increases in egosystem goals were marginally associated with increased weekly depressed mood ($\beta = .06, p = .09$), whereas increased ecosystem goals were associated with decreased weekly depressed mood ($\beta = -.12, p < .05$).
Mediation analyses indicated that changes in social support fully explained the relationship between chronic goals and changes in depressive symptoms over the first semester of college (see Figure 10.2), and weekly feelings of loneliness fully explained the within-person effect of weekly ecosystem goals on weekly depressed mood (see Figure 10.3).

In sum, analyses of within- and between-person associations, and analyses of changes over time, all indicate that ecosystem goals predicted improved psychological well-being, whereas egosystem goals predicted decreased well-being. These findings suggest that having the goal to support others (i.e., ecosystem goals) may be a more effective and sustainable way to enhance well-being than trying to obtain approval from others by constructing desired self-images. Further research is needed to explore the process through which (and under what conditions) egosystem and ecosystem goals have an impact on psychological well-being.

Figure 10.2 Path coefficients for change in social support as a mediator of the relation between average egosystem and ecosystem goals and change in depressive symptoms over 12 weeks.

Figure 10.3 Path coefficients for weekly loneliness as a mediator of the relation between weekly egosystem and ecosystem goals and weekly depressed mood.
EGOSYSTEM AND ECOSYSTEM GOALS AND LEARNING

We also examined changes in academic achievement goals from the beginning to the end of the first semester, by entering both chronic egosystem and ecosystem goals as predictors of posttest achievement goals, controlling for pretest achievement goals (Crocker, Niiya, & Luhtanen, 2007). As expected, students higher in chronic ecosystem goals showed an increase in the goal to acquire knowledge ($\beta = .23, p < .01$), and an increase in the goal to learn from failure ($\beta = .25, p < .01$), from the beginning to the end of the semester. These findings suggest that ecosystem goals are not simply a byproduct of learning goals, but actually may cause students to be more learning-oriented over the term. In contrast, students higher in chronic egosystem goals showed an increase in the goal to outperform their peers ($\beta = .19, p < .01$), the goal to avoid doing poorly in their class ($\beta = .18, p < .01$), and the goal to validate competence ($\beta = .30, p < .01$), and a decrease in the goal to learn from failure ($\beta = -.17, p < .05$). Egosystem goals increasingly orient students to appear competent and undermine the ability to learn from failure over the semester.

Ecosystem goals also predicted students’ weekly reports of learning experiences but egosystem goals did not. Students who had chronically higher ecosystem goals asked more questions in class ($\beta = .40, p < .001$), reported greater interest in their classes ($\beta = .38, p < .001$), showed better self-regulation such as avoiding procrastination, and more frequently attempted to expand their capacities ($\beta = .22, p < .01$). These results persisted even after controlling for students’ learning and performance goals at the beginning of the semester, suggesting that the positive association between ecosystem goals and learning experience is not simply due to their association with learning goals. Egosystem goals did not predict any of these learning experiences ($\beta$s < .03, $p$s > .40).

Week-to-week analyses showed similar results. On weeks students were higher in their ecosystem goals relative to their own baseline, they reported asking more questions in class ($\beta = .15, p < .001$), greater interest in their classes ($\beta = .14, p < .001$), and better self-regulation ($\beta = .14, p < .001$). In contrast, being higher in the egosystem goals on a given week did not predict any of these academic experiences (all $\beta$s < .04, $p$s > .10).

Taken together, our findings suggest that students with egosystem goals increasingly aspire to demonstrate their competence without actually engaging in effective learning strategies, such as asking questions in class, maintaining interest in courses, and regulating their learning behaviors. We speculate that in the long run, egosystem goals undermine students’ academic performance and create discrepancies between their desire to
appear competent and their actual competence. Learning seems more sustainable when students endorse ecosystem goals. Ecosystem goals increased students’ goals to learn from their failures and setbacks over the semester and also predicted effective learning strategies.

DISCUSSION

Students must navigate many new challenges, social and academic, as they adjust to college. This chapter explored how goals affect first-year students’ adjustment to college. Results of a longitudinal study of incoming college freshman support the hypothesis that egosystem goals undermine relationships, well-being, and learning, whereas ecosystem goals foster relationships, well-being, and learning.

Forming friendships is one of the most important tasks of the first year of college, especially for those students who leave home and live in campus residence halls, like the students in our sample. Our findings showed that students who wanted to support others were more successful at building support for themselves; participants who were chronically high in ecosystem goals experienced increased perceived social support and increased trust over the course of the semester. In addition, students felt closer to others and less lonely on weeks when they were higher in ecosystem goals, relative to their own baselines. Egosystem goals, on the other hand, predicted decreased perceived social support and trust, and weekly egosystem goals were associated with more loneliness. These results suggest that trying to get others to see the self in a positive light does not effectively build social support. Rather, our findings suggest that students can create support by giving it to others. This possibility does not exclude the role of personality traits such as attachment style or self-esteem in fostering social support, but rather suggests an avenue through which students can proactively build support, rather than being at the mercy of what is available, or not available, to them. Furthermore, our findings suggest that ecosystem goals are most effective when people let go of egosystem goals—that is, when they have the goal of supporting others, regardless of what it means about themselves, or whether they will be seen in a positive light as a result.

We also examined whether egosystem goals increase the risk, and ecosystem goals reduce the risk, of developing symptoms of depression and anxiety. Our findings provide preliminary support for the hypothesis that ecosystem goals reduce symptoms, whereas egosystem goals increase symptoms. In addition to reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety, week-to-week fluctuations in ecosystem goals also predicted increased vitality, self-esteem, and feeling “present.” Mediation analyses revealed that social support accounts for the effect of ecosystem goals on decreased depressive symptoms.
symptoms. That is, by trying to support others, students may build more support for themselves, which in turn may lead to greater well-being and resistance to depression. This finding is consistent with the large body of research showing that social support is an important predictor of well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985) and that low levels of social support are related to depression (Monroe et al., 1983; Windle, 1992). Challenging the notion that people need to focus on themselves and their own needs in order to boost happiness and self-esteem, these findings suggest that supporting others’ well-being might be a more effective means of enhancing one’s own.

Finally, our findings suggest that goals focused on supporting others are more conducive to learning than goals focused on building self-image of competence. Findings from the longitudinal study extend these findings to suggest that ecosystem goals may encourage learning-from-failure goals, perhaps because ecosystem goals remind people of why learning is important to them, beyond its implications for the self. For example, when the premed student does poorly on his exam, he can view it as an indictment of his self-worth, or he can use the failure as an opportunity to learn about where he can improve to better support his classmates—and his future patients.

**LIMITATIONS**

The findings discussed in this chapter provide preliminary support for the idea that students’ goals affect their relationships, well-being, and learning during their first semester of college. Although analyses of change over time suggest a causal effect of goals, long-term field intervention studies or experimental research would bolster evidence for a causal effect of goals on adjustment-related outcomes. We suspect that the causal effect goes in both directions: ecosystem goals, in particular, may create upward spirals over time—the more one gives, the more one receives, and thus the more one is able to give. Future research may examine in more depth the causal relationship between goals and adjustment outcomes, and the processes by which ecosystem goals may create upward spirals.

Our findings suggest that goals predict college students’ adjustment in their first semester, but the generalizability of these effects to other populations has not been established. The transition to college presents multiple challenges, both academic and social, that may not be present at other stages of life. Also, because not all college students experience the same challenges, we would expect these findings to apply best to students at large, selective, residential universities, like the one in our study. It would be interesting to examine whether ecosystem goals are equally beneficial during other major life transitions, positive or negative, such as a marriage, birth of
a child, divorce, or death of a spouse. It remains to be seen whether ecosystem goals are equally beneficial for other populations and contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

A college education has significant benefits to the individual and to society, but is exceedingly expensive, and especially costly for those students who are unable to take full advantage of its opportunities. Consequently, it is important to understand factors that ease students’ adjustment to college in their first semester. Research on promoting a successful adjustment to college has tended to focus on aspects of the environment and individual personality traits, without specifically examining what students can do to foster their own adjustment.

Our findings suggest that goals may be a useful point of intervention for college students. Goals are more malleable than personality traits, and goals are more controllable than external factors such as the number of friends one has, the supportiveness of one’s family, and one’s living situation. Rather than being at the mercy of one’s social world, ecosystem goals put students at the source of creating what they want in their relationships, their classes, and their community. Future research might explore whether helping students clarify their goals, and particularly articulating ecosystem goals for important domains of their life, at the start of college might facilitate their adjustment in the first semester, and possibly beyond.

AUTHORS’ NOTE

Jennifer Crocker, Julianna Breines, Amy Canevello, Mary Y. Liu, and Yu Niiya, Research Center for Group Dynamics, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan.

The research reported in this chapter was supported by National Institute of Mental Health grant R01 MH58869.

We are grateful to Paul Denning, without whose tireless efforts the data for the Goals and Adjustment to College Project would not have been collected, and to Rebecca Caulfield, Timothy Cavnar, Andrew Crocker, and Sarah Franz for their assistance with data collection and entry and Riia Luhitanen for her assistance with data analysis.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jennifer Crocker, Research Center for Group Dynamics, Institute for Social Research, 426 Thompson Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106.

E-mail jcrocker@umich.edu.
REFERENCES


