

ACEs and Traumatic Stress: Correlates of Educational Functioning Among Trauma Exposed Students in Post-secondary Education

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Introduction

- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that occur before the age of 18.
- Examples of ACEs include abuse, neglect, and household challenges such as emotional, physical and sexual abuse, parental substance use and parental incarceration (Felitti et al., 1998).
- Students with higher levels of ACEs have poorer academic performance more likely to have greater mental health issues such as drug and alcohol use. (Windle et al., 2018; Davies et al., 2022; Watt et al., 2021; Dube et al., 2003; Finkelhor et al., 2015).
- This study examines the impact of ACEs, trauma exposure, and symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on the educational outcomes of post-secondary education students.
- We hypothesize that PSE students who report more ACEs and have positive PTSD screens will also report more difficulty with academic tasks.
- Based on the findings, implications can be suggested for service provisions for PSE students with PTSD.

Method

PSE students (N=539; 34% males vs 59% females; 57% white vs 43% non-white; 76% undergraduate vs. 24% graduate/med/law students) who reported at least one traumatic event completed surveys of:

- Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire (ACEs; Felitti et al., 1998)
- Traumatic Life Events Questionnaire (TLEQ; Kubany et al., 2000)
- PTSD symptom checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5; Weathers et al., 2013) with PCL-5 \geq 33 indicating positive PTSD
- Educational Barriers Survey (Mullen et al., 2014)

Regression was utilized to determine the impact of ACEs and trauma exposure on study dropouts, overall PTSD symptoms, and the impact of PTSD presence on difficulty with academic tasks. Independent sample t-test compared educational barriers for those with and without positive PTSD screens.

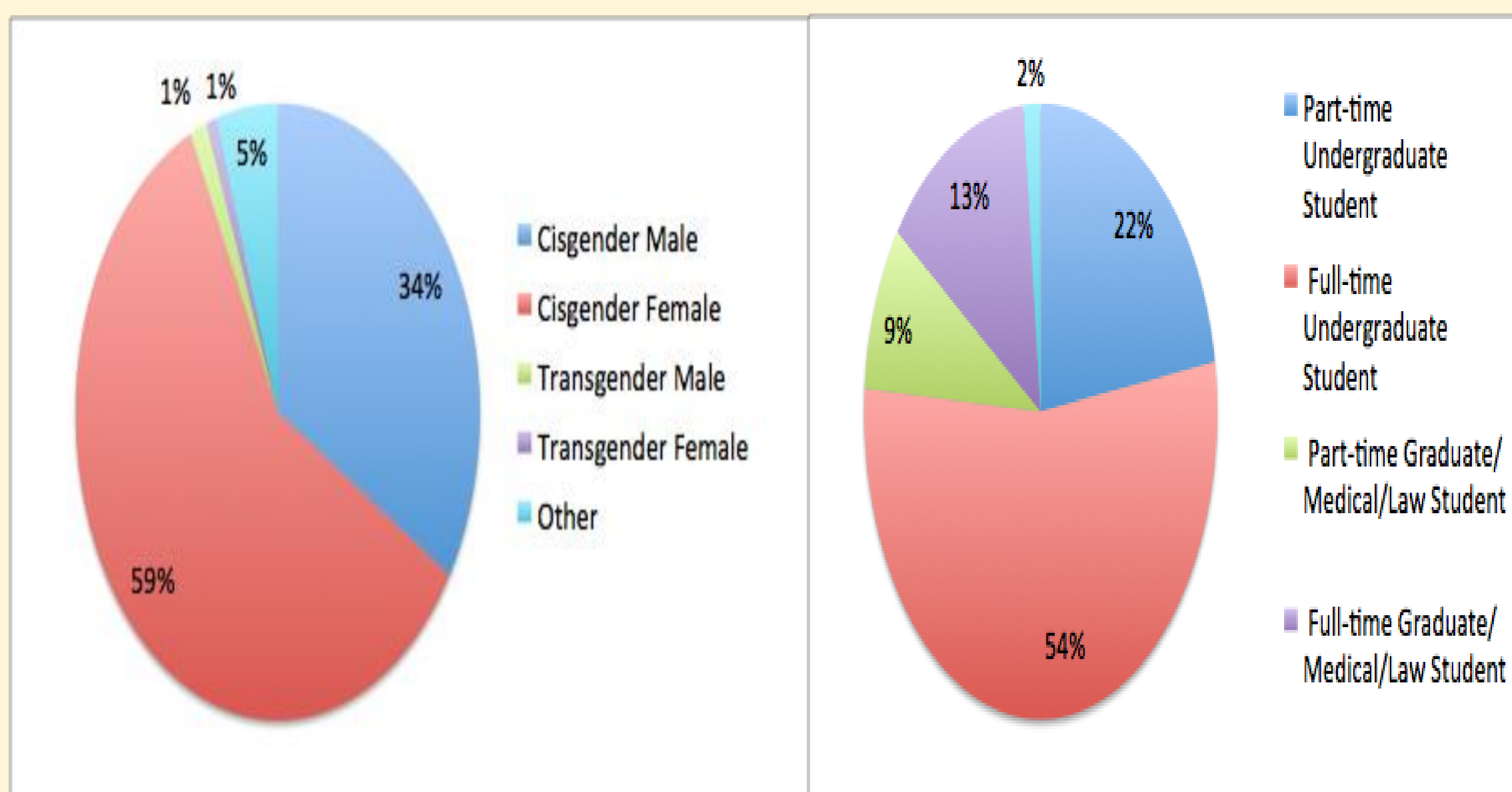


Fig 1. Demographic (n=539 trauma exposed students)

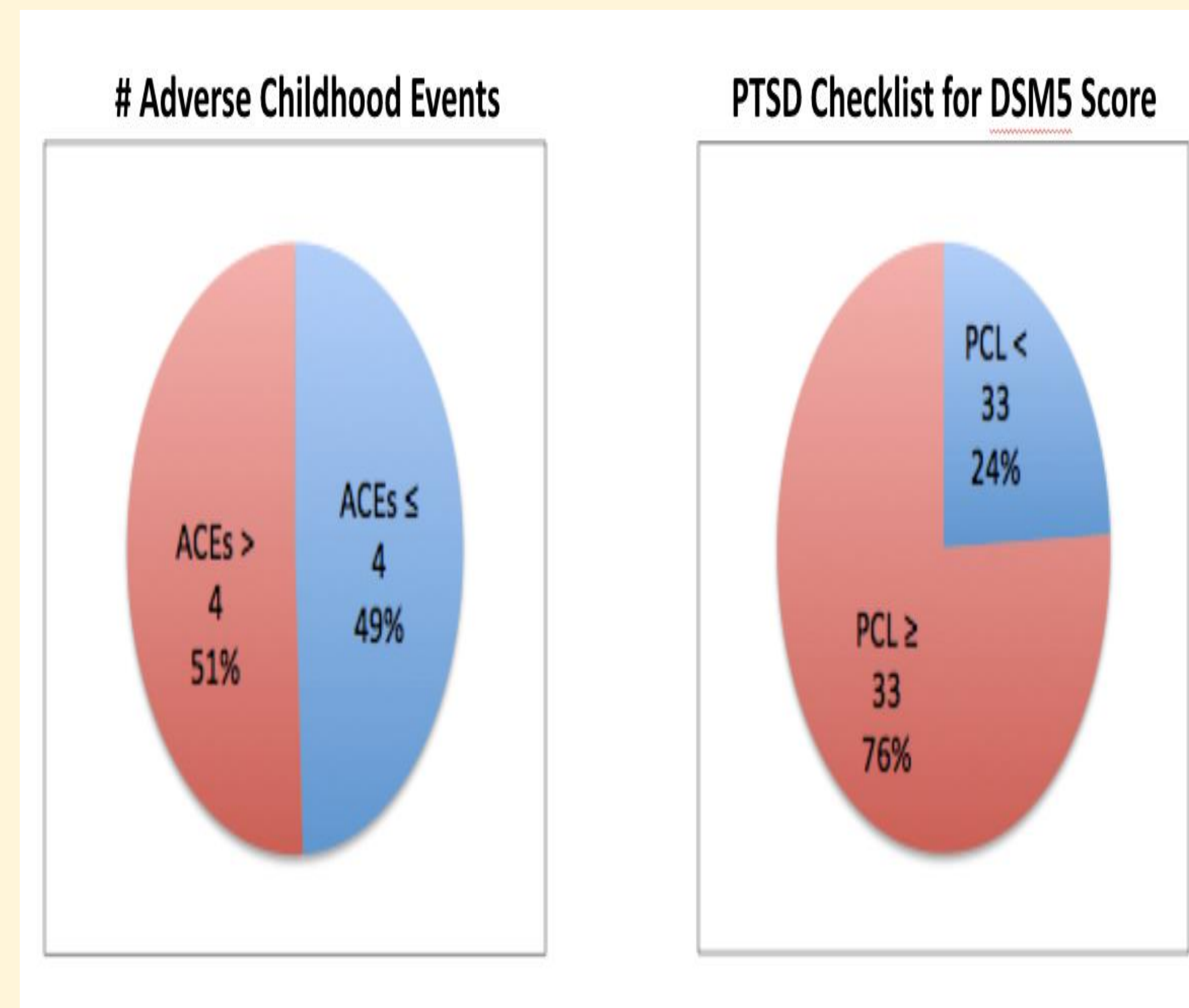


Fig 2. Demographic (n=539 trauma exposed students)

Results

Half of the participants had \geq 5 ACEs and a quarter had \geq 7 ACEs. 76% of the sample had PCL-5 \geq 33, indicating a positive PTSD screen. In the regression analysis, both ACEs and trauma exposure predicted number of dropouts, but not PTSD symptoms. ACEs was a stronger predictor of PTSD symptoms than total trauma exposure. PSE students with PTSD scored higher for educational barriers in terms of:

- difficulty with submission of assignments
- speaking with professors
- taking exams
- organizing course materials
- meeting course deadlines
- class presentations
- completing group projects
- overall ability to complete academic tasks

The two groups did not differ in taking notes, writing papers, participating in class discussion.

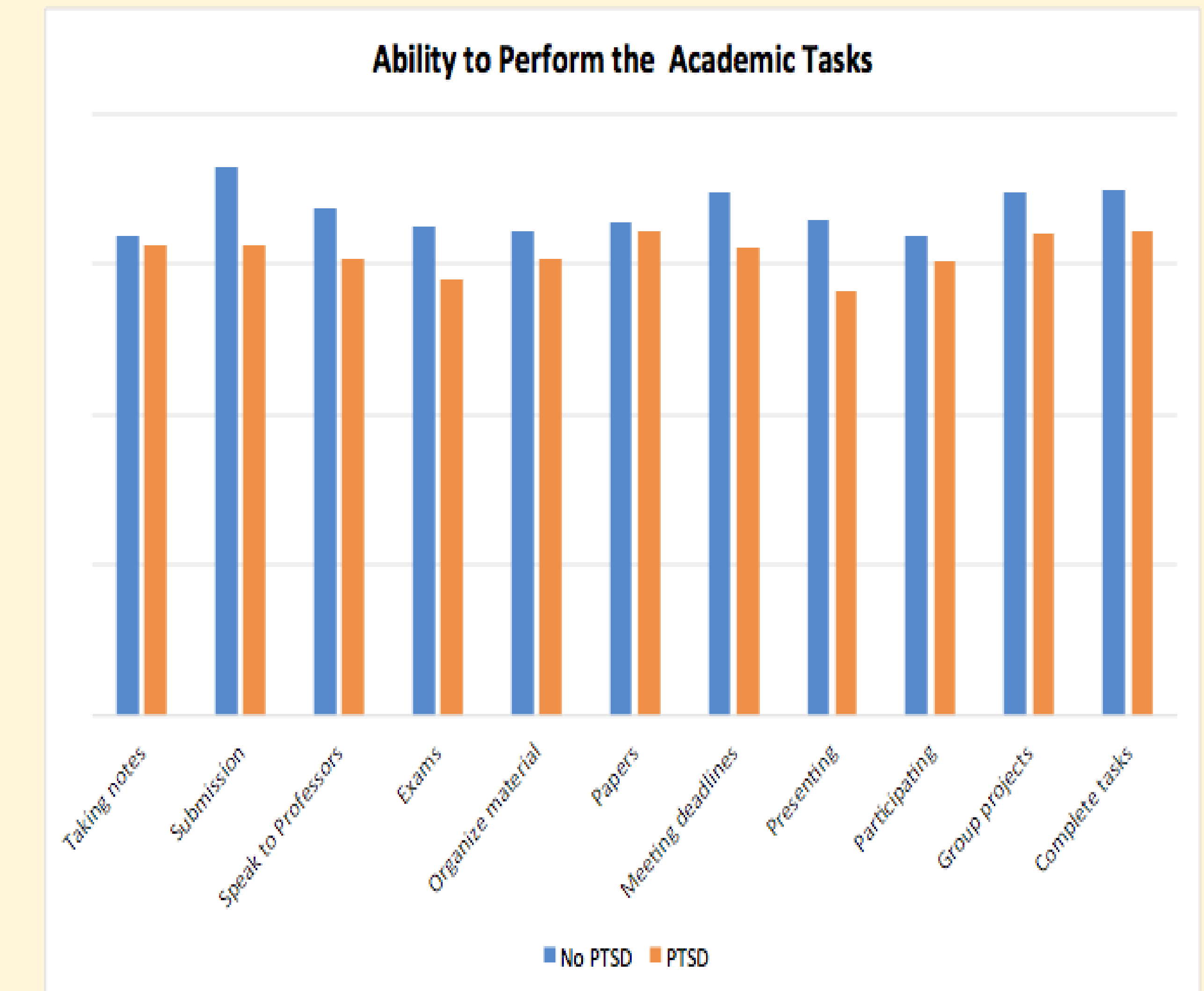


Fig 3. T-test on Educational Barriers for Students with and w/o Positive PTSD Screens

Discussion

- Findings are consistent with research suggest that ACEs, trauma exposure and PTSD in post-secondary students contributes to poorer academic performance, such as lower GPA and increased likelihood of dropping out of college (Bryan et al., 2014; Boyraz et al., 2016).
- Findings suggested that PSE students with positive PTSD screens face challenges in many different areas from academic, financial to social.
- Helpful services would involve mental health support, academic accommodation financial aid, and university policies for safety and inclusiveness.

Selected References

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