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Here to Learn or Just Earn: College Student Motivation and Success

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Abstract: *The study explores the influence of motivation on college students' achievement, emphasizing the differential roles of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. 147 college students, aged eighteen to forty-two, completed a survey consisting of the Academic Motivation Scale and the Academic Success Inventory for College Students and provided their grade point average (GPA). Findings demonstrate that intrinsically motivated individuals have higher confidence in their ability to succeed, ability to attain employment, and external motivation for the future (all indicators of success). There was no significant relationship between the different motivation types and GPA. These results suggest that confident students driven by goals that focus on the future, including their career aspirations, have higher levels of intrinsic motivation than their more extrinsically motivated peers.*

UNDERGRADUATE CONTRIBUTION

The contributions of the first author, as an undergraduate, began with the process of conceptualizing and selecting the research topic and continued with selecting appropriate scales, creating the online survey, recruiting participants, and collecting the data. In addition, I conducted extensive research to identify and integrate a theoretical framework supporting our study. I authored the majority of the research paper, including sections such as the introduction, literature review, methods, and discussion. I received assistance from an advisor during data interpretation as well as writing the results portion.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, major changes have occurred in both students and the landscape of higher education (Chan & Lewis, 2021). Individuals no longer view college as the only path to success in the US. Increasingly, individuals recognize that there are as many paths to success as there are reasons to attend (and graduate from) college. Examining college students' motivation plays a significant role in shaping not only individual experiences but also the broader world of academia. This study seeks to analyze the relationship between college student motivation and academic achievement, focusing on the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Though GPA is used as one measure of academic success in this study, it is important to note that student achievement encompasses multiple dimensions including overall confidence, satisfaction, self-regulation, and interest (Prevatt et al., 2011). This research aims to discern if the source of motivation, whether it be an innate desire and interest to learn or the desire to achieve

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external rewards such as status and wealth, influences the college experience and, in turn, student achievement. Students who are primarily driven by intrinsic motivation will, in theory, score higher across dimensions such as self-regulation, confidence in abilities, and study skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

Using the self-determination perspective of Ryan and Deci as a theoretical framework (2020) provides a basis for a deeper understanding of the concept of motivation. Developed by Deci and Ryan in 1985, self-determination theory (SDT) posits that individuals possess an innate psychological need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ito & Umemoto, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Wu, 2019; Zhoc et al., 2019). Autonomy marks the need for and right to personal agency and the freedom to make choices, competence relates to the desire for mastery and effectiveness in one's pursuit, and relatedness pertains to the need for meaningful social interactions and a sense of belonging within the academic community.

SDT offers a comprehensive lens through which the intricate dynamics of intrinsic motivation can be understood. Within the academic context, intrinsic motivation, the highest level of self-determined behavior, consists of students' engagement in academic pursuits driven by the innate satisfaction they derive from the learning process itself (Karlen et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Tasgin & Coskun, 2018). Theoretically, this type of motivation leads to academic success as a result of committing oneself fully to the learning process. Academic success has been defined in a myriad of ways (Ito & Umemoto, 2022; Karlen et al., 2019; Wu, 2019). For the purpose of this study, the construct of success is measured by scores from the *Academic Success for College Students Inventory* and GPA. Learning about the relationship between students' intrinsic motivation and the connection to positive experiences within college is of extreme importance within the context of higher education.

While some scholars within the instructor-centric literature have embraced the principles of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2020), research has remained largely centered on instructors' communication practices and their impact on students' motivation. By grounding the study in the theoretical tenets of SDT, the research not only bolsters the empirical foundations of the existing literature but also advances the understanding of how intrinsic motivation influences student achievement in higher education.

INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Self-determination theory (SDT) provides valuable insights into the varying types of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is imperative to understanding how motivation shapes students' academic experiences and their success in higher education. Intrinsic motivation consists of students' engagement in academic pursuits driven by the innate satisfaction they derive from the learning process itself (Karlen et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Tasgin & Coskun, 2018). This leads to a deeper and more persevering commitment to their academic goals fueled by the fulfillment of achievement and, arguably more importantly, the path to said achievement. In contrast, extrinsic motivation is sustained by external factors, such as tangible rewards, outside pressures, and/or demands placed upon students (Karlen et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Tasgin & Coskun, 2018).

ACHIEVEMENT, MOTIVATION, AND ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Achievement, motivation, and engagement act as interconnected components of learning in which each is essential to bring about the other (Ito & Umemoto, 2022; Janke, 2020; Karlen et al., 2019; Wu, 2019). Devoid of motivation, a student loses the vital link to engagement which inevitably leads to challenges in achieving success. Ryan and Deci (2020) identify intrinsic motivation as a key driver of academic achievement, emphasizing its cultivation of genuine engagement with the learning process. Moreover, Wu's (2019) extensive study on general academic motivation reinforces the notion that sustained motivation positively predicts satisfaction with studies and vitality, thus demonstrating the enduring importance of motivation throughout a student's academic journey. Zhoc et al. (2019) present yet another perspective and identify behavioral engagement as the most significant positive correlate with performance, while also noting intrinsic motivation's crucial influence on emotional engagement. These findings illuminate the multifaceted nature of engagement as well as its distinct dimensions. Karlen et al. (2019) emphasize the positive relationship between academic motivation and students' approach to tasks, time investment, and energy expenditure, all of which positively correlate with overall achievement.

The literature affirms the interwoven and mutually interdependent relationship between motivation, engagement, and achievement (Ito & Umemoto, 2022; Janke, 2020; Karlen et al., 2019; Wu, 2019). A recurring theme across these diverse studies is the significance of intrinsic motivation in shaping academic engagement and success. The connection of intrinsic motivation alongside academic pursuits consistently emerges as a predictor of positive outcomes (Ito & Umemoto, 2022; Janke, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Furthermore, the studies collectively highlight the critical role of sustained academic engagement in predicting desirable outcomes, including retention, achievement, degree completion, and occupational earnings (Wu, 2019; Karlen et al., 2019; Tasgin & Coskun, 2018). Overall, these findings not only emphasize the importance of promoting intrinsic motivation but also point to the enduring impact of sustained engagement in promoting holistic student success in higher education.

However, a notable gap persists in recent literature concerning a thorough investigation of how modern students' intrinsic motivation correlates with their success in higher education. This study endeavors to bridge this gap by examining the relationship between the types of motivation and academic success, as measured by GPA and the *Academic Success Inventory for College Students*. In addition to discerning how both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations manifest among students, the study considers how specific indicators of success are intertwined with the different types of motivation.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

This quantitative research study was conducted from October to December 2023. Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, convenience and snowball sampling were employed to recruit participants. In addition to in-person recruitment, individuals were recruited via email. Participants were required to be current college students between the ages of 18-64. The majority of participants were White, female, and between the ages of 18-25.

INSTRUMENTS

This research utilized two scales, the *Academic Motivation Scale* (AMS) and the *Academic Success Inventory for College Students* (ASICS), to measure student motivation and success respectively.

The AMS assesses three types of intrinsic motivation (intrinsic motivation to know, to accomplish things, and to experience stimulation), three types of extrinsic motivation (external, introjected, and identified regulation), and amotivation (Vallerand, 1992). Previous research indicates that Cronbach's alpha for the seven dimensions ranges between .725- .893 (Algharaibeh, 2021). This seven-point Likert scale contains 28 items, with four items per subscale. Sample statements include "For the pleasure that I experience while I am surpassing myself in one of my personal accomplishments" and "To show myself that I am an intelligent person". These statements evaluate the degree to which the participant's reasons for going to college correspond to each type of motivation.

The ASICS is a self-report instrument designed to measure academic success in college students. Cronbach's alpha for the total ASICS was .93, supporting the internal consistency of the total questionnaire. Cronbach alphas for the subscales ranged from .93-.77. (Prevatt et al., 2011). The survey is composed of 50 statements divided into 10 subscales (Ndoye et al., 2020). The survey includes questions (e.g. I skipped this class a lot, I enjoyed the lectures) measuring multiple factors related to academic success such as general academic skills, career decidedness, quality of instruction, internal motivation/interest, external motivation/future, confidence, lack of anxiety, concentration/self-regulation, socializing, and personal adjustment. Participants were first prompted to "Select one class that has been the hardest or most difficult for you within the past year. Please answer the following questions with this particular class in mind" using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from one (Strongly Disagree) to seven (Strongly Agree).

RESULTS

Analysis revealed several statistically significant positive relationships between aspects of intrinsic motivation and success indicators. Correlations were found among *intrinsic motivation to know* and career $r =. 203$, $p < .05$; extrinsic motivation for the future $r = .275$, $p < .01$; and confidence $r = .271$, $p < .01$. Furthermore, significant correlations were found among *intrinsic motivation towards accomplishment* and career $r = .230$, $p < .01$; extrinsic motivation towards the future $r = .254$, $p < .01$; and confidence $r = .316$, $p < .01$. There were also significant correlations seen between *intrinsic motivation to experience stimulation* and external motivation towards the future $r = .195$, $p < .05$; and confidence $r = .194$, $p < .01$. No significant relationships were found between type of motivation and GPA.

DISCUSSION

These findings demonstrate that certain dimensions of intrinsic motivation are positively associated with aspects of academic achievement. Students driven by intrinsic motives tend to excel in areas that contribute to a positive experience, aligning with SDT's emphasis on autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Consequently, this stresses the need for educational environments that foster intrinsic motivation to enhance student outcomes and promote holistic development. Understanding the dynamics of motivation is imperative when designing effective educational interventions and support systems. Cultivating intrinsic motivation

can improve student engagement, satisfaction, and overall academic success, producing a more fulfilling learning experience. While insightful, the study cannot account for all the factors affecting student achievement. There is plenty of room for further exploration into potentially influential variables such as socioeconomic status, cultural background, and age. Future researchers could explore the longitudinal effects of intrinsic motivation on academic trajectories and investigate interventions aimed at promoting intrinsic motivation in educational settings. Additionally, classroom instruction could benefit from studying the interplay between educators and students to enhance the professional fulfillment of both parties where the environment is conducive to meaningful teaching and learning experiences.

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