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Predicting student achievement for low stakes tests with effort and task value ☆

James S. Cole [a,*], David A. Bergin [b], Tiffany A. Whittaker [c]

[a] *Indiana University, Center for Postsecondary Research, 1900 East 10th Street, Eigenmann Hall, Suite 419, Bloomington, IN 47406, USA*
[b] *University of Missouri, College of Education, 16 Hill Hall, Columbia, MO 65211, USA*
[c] *University of Texas at Austin, Educational Psychology, 1 University Station, D5800, Austin, TX 78712, USA*

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Abstract

We investigated motivation for taking low stakes tests. Based on expectancy-value theory, we expected that the effect of student perceptions of three task values (interest, usefulness, and importance) on low stakes test performance would be mediated by the student's reported effort. We hypothesized that all three task value components would play a significant role in predicting test-taking effort, and that effort would significantly predict test performance. Participants were 1005 undergraduate students enrolled at four midsize public universities. After students took all four subtests of CBASE, a standardized general education exam, they immediately filled out a motivation survey. Path analyses showed that the task value variables *usefulness* and *importance* significantly predicted test-taking effort and performance for all four tests. These results provide evidence that students who report trying hard on low stakes tests score higher than those who do not. The results indicate that if students do not perceive importance or usefulness of an exam, their effort suffers and so does their test score. While the data are correlational, they suggest that it might be useful for test administrators and school staff to communicate to students the importance and usefulness of the test that they are being asked to complete.

Keywords: Test-taking motivation; Low stakes test; Expectancy-Value Theory; General education assessment; Test-taking effort

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* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 812 856 5150.
E-mail address: colejs@indiana.edu (J.S. Cole).

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1. Introduction

Documenting student learning is a major issue in higher education. Institutions of higher education use information about student learning for such purposes as improving instruction and demonstrating student learning to funding sources (e.g., state legislatures) and accrediting agencies (Flowers, Osterlind, Pascarella, & Pierson, 2001; Palomba & Banta, 1999; Stone & Freidman, 2002). Researchers have used many techniques to show that college students learn in college, including direct assessments of learning such as standardized tests. Direct assessment techniques often have a shortcoming that is not always recognized or acknowledged—that is, for students, the tests have no consequence. We term these low stakes tests. While these are low stakes tests for the students, they are sometimes high stakes for institutions because accreditation and legislative funding can hinge on test score data. For example, the state of Texas recently proposed requiring that graduating college seniors take standardized tests that would be low stakes for the students (no consequence), but would be linked to state funding for the institution (Jaschik, 2007). Legislatures wish to hold educational institutions accountable for student learning (Higher Learning Commission., 2002; Palomba & Banta, 1999), and some states even require all institutions to use the same standardized multiple-choice tests in order to facilitate cross-campus comparisons (Klein, Kuh, Chun, Hamilton, & Shavelson, 2005). Common standardized cognitive tests in higher education include the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), CollegeBASE, College Outcomes Measures Program (COMP), Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), and Academic Profile.

The issue of motivation to try hard on a test is important but not well understood. It is clear that the reasons that students have for taking a test affect test performance, but nuances of how reasons affect test scores are only beginning to be investigated. In the following sections, we discuss the issue of low stakes tests, we review literature on motivation for test-taking, and we apply Expectancy Value theory to the issue of test-taking motivation.

1.1. Low stakes tests

The issue of low motivation to try hard on low stakes tests has been acknowledged by commentators on assessment in higher education (Erwin, 1991, p. 28; Erwin & Wise, 2002, pp. 70–71; Ewell, 1991, p. 94; Palomba & Banta, 1999, pp. 74–82, 92–93). Palomba and Banta (1999) point out that at some campuses, student participation in assessment is encouraged and at others it is required, but in neither case does the outcome affect student grades or graduation. Palomba and Banta go on to say that incentives for students to participate in voluntary forms of assessment include the perception that they have contributed to program improvement, the receipt of feedback, the opportunity for self-reflection, and the receipt of tangible rewards like movie passes and free food.

The possibility of low student effort and motivation raises the concern of whether data collected are a valid measure of student achievement (Napoli & Raymond, 2004). According to Erwin and Wise (2002), "the challenge to motivate our students to give their best effort when there are few or no personal consequences is probably the most vexing assessment problem we face" (p. 71).

While our study focuses on motivation for test-taking in higher education, the theoretical issues of are of wide importance. The use of standardized tests to assess student academic achievement is widespread in U.S. elementary and secondary schools. Standardized