

The role of personality and motivation in predicting early college academic success in non-traditional students at a Hispanic-serving institution

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Received 19 May 2006; received in revised form 20 November 2007; accepted 22 November 2007

Abstract

Non-cognitive factors represent a chance to learn more about how to help students succeed in early college experiences. This study examined personality and motivation as predictors of first-quarter GPA in a sample of 315 non-traditional undergraduates at a Hispanic-serving institution. Our results provide support for the importance of high levels of conscientiousness, intrinsic motivation, and low levels of extrinsic motivation in first-quarter school success. Implications and possible interventions are discussed.

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Keywords: Non-cognitive; School achievement; College; Hispanic; Motivation; Personality

Almost 15 years ago, Mouw and Khanna (1993) noted that there was considerable variance in college GPA that could not be explained by the traditional pre-college predictors (e.g., high school GPA, SAT and ACT scores). Since then, Robbins et al. (2004) identified three types of predictors: traditional (e.g., SAT scores), demographic (e.g., gender), and psychosocial factors (e.g., personality, motivation). Robbins, Allen, Casillas, Peterson, and Le (2006) found that several psychosocial factors were related to academic performance and retention.

The important factors, which they dub “Student Readiness” indicators, included Academic Discipline, Social Activity, Emotional Control, Commitment to College, and Social Connection. Indeed, one can argue, as did Robbins et al. (2004), that such a descriptive approach is a valuable one. Such approaches integrate more traditional concepts, such as the five-factor personality model or the intrinsic–extrinsic theory of motivation, allowing past research to be utilized.

Indeed, there have been many studies of personality and academic success, mostly using the Big-Five model that argues five basic factors underlie traditional personality assessment. The personality factor most repeatedly linked to academic achieve-

ment is conscientiousness (e.g., Higgins, Peterson, & Rihl, 2007; Nofle & Robins, 2007). Other studies have occasionally found evidence to support a different factor (for example, Lounsbury, Welsh, & Gibson, 2005, found evidence for openness to experience), but nothing close to the strong pattern arguing for the importance of conscientiousness.

The relationship between motivation and school success is also well established (e.g., Pintrich & Schunk, 1996), if less clearly. Several studies have looked at academic success and motivational orientation. Intrinsic motivation and its related goals have been found to relate to classroom success (e.g., Church, Elliott, & Gable, 2001). The research is not as consistent as it is with personality; for example, Baker (2004) found that motivation was not related to academic achievement.

Studies that have examined both personality and motivation have found highly conflicting results (e.g., McKenzie, Gow, & Schweiter, 2004; Phillips, Abraham, & Bond, 2003). In this paper, we study personality and motivation variables on a unique population of non-traditional students at a Hispanic-serving institution to determine if past results are replicated. Most of the previously discussed studies have been conducted on traditional populations. Yet non-traditional students can often have different needs, demands on their time, and reliance on different types of cognitive abilities (e.g., Chao & Good, 2004). Self-

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beliefs in Hispanic populations have been studied (e.g., Gloria, Castellanos, & Lopez, 2005); in contrast, variables such as personality and motivation have not been studied in depth. Given the extensive studies showing the importance of personality and motivation, this oversight should be rectified. Based on past results, we anticipate that, in replication of past work, conscientiousness and intrinsic motivation will be related to academic achievement in a population of non-traditional students at a Hispanic-serving institution.

Experiences during the early stages of college have been found to be critical to student adjustment and, ultimately, to long-term academic success (Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliot, 2002). In fact, researchers have suggested that even the first two weeks of school can have long-term impact on college student experiences (Woosley, 2003). This study will examine the relationship of personality and motivation on first-quarter academic success.

1. Method

1.1. Educational institution

The host University is mid-sized (approximately 14,000 students), and serves a student body that comprises a substantial portion of non-traditional students. Specifically, the mean age of the student body is 25.9 years. The student population is ethnically diverse (32.75% Hispanic, 11.74, African American, 4% Asian-Pacific Islander), and the University is recognized by the US Federal Department of Education as a Hispanic-serving institution. Further, the University draws from a population that is substantially economically disadvantaged, evidenced in part by the fact that the most recent data (2005–2006) reveals 57% of the student population received the need-based Pell grant. In addition, more than 50% of the student population is first-generation college student, and nearly 40% of the student population has dependents.

1.2. Participants

Participants ($n=315$) were undergraduate students completing their first quarter of study at a four-year university in the southwestern United States. The sample was predominantly women (245; 79%) and represented a mix of racial/ethnic backgrounds including European American/Caucasian (46%), Hispanic American/Latino (27%), African American/Black (10%), and Asian American (9%), with the remaining 8% indicating “other.” The mean age of participants ($M=23.53$, $SD=8.55$) was slightly lower than the overall University population (25.9), but is consistent with the mean age (23.33) of undergraduates. This difference was expected given the sample comprises new students. The mean GPA in the present sample ($M=3.11$, $SD=.66$) was slightly higher than the GPA for the overall University population (3.01).

1.3. Procedure

Participants were recruited through in-class announcements, flyers, and an invitation sent via email during the

initial weeks of the Fall quarter of 2003. Each form of communication included a description of the study and information on how to participate. In order to assure confidentiality, each interested student was assigned a unique password which served as their access code to the on-line survey. The survey included one hundred ninety-three Likert-type items, and a single page of demographics. One hundred ten items were used in the present study. The remaining items measured similar individual academic characteristics, but were not germane to the current research. Participation required approximately 45 min, and each participant was entered into a drawing for \$5.00 gift certificates. Academic information, coded by participant password, was obtained from the University’s institutional research office and combined with survey data. Personality, motivation, and demographic data were collected from participants during the first several weeks of the Fall quarter. Subsequent academic performance data (i.e., participants’ Fall Quarter GPA) were gathered at the beginning of the Winter quarter (i.e., roughly three months after survey data were gathered).

1.4. Measures

1.4.1. Motivation orientation

The Kaufman–Agars Motivation-orientation Scale (KAMS: Kaufman & Agars, *in press*) was used to measure participant motivation. The KAMS comprises nine scenarios (such as choosing a college class) and 60 items. Participants respond using a 10-point Likert-type scale to indicate the extent to which each statement represents his or her likely behavior or preference. The scale includes intrinsic and extrinsic factors, with 30 items representing each. The intrinsic factor represents individual preferences for activities that are worthwhile, provide opportunity for growth, and suggest that intelligence is malleable. The extrinsic factor represents individual preferences for tasks that achievement, rewards and recognition, and the belief that intelligence is fixed. In the present study, coefficient alphas were .91 (intrinsic) and .93 (extrinsic).

1.4.2. Personality

The five-factor model of personality was measured using the 50-item version of the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP; Goldberg, 1999; International Personality Item Pool, 2001). The IPIP comprises 10 Likert-type items to measure each of five personality dimensions including extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience. Coefficient alphas for each dimension were: extroversion ($\alpha=.87$), agreeableness ($\alpha=.76$), conscientiousness ($\alpha=.78$), emotional stability ($\alpha=.85$), and openness to experience ($\alpha=.76$).

1.4.3. Academic success

Academic success was measured using first-quarter grades. The University’s Institutional Research Office provided academic information which was combined with

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