



Proactive personality and the expanded criterion domain of performance: Predicting academic citizenship and counterproductive behaviors



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ABSTRACT

We examined proactive personality as a noncognitive predictor of outcomes in an expanded criterion domain that included in-role performance, citizenship behaviors, and counterproductive behaviors. Our findings indicate that proactive personality predicts both citizenship and counterproductive behaviors in an academic setting. Importantly, these results were observed after accounting for the effects of traditional cognitive predictors of student performance (i.e., high school grades and standardized test scores). These findings have implications for institutions that define “success” beyond grades and are looking to improve their selection process while avoiding some of the pitfalls of cognitive ability testing.

The profile of the average college student has changed because of changes in the demographics of undergraduate students and the increasing costs of higher education (Archibald & Feldman, 2008). More first-year students now enter college having a part-time or full-time position, as compared with 20 years ago (Carnevale, Smith, Melton, & Price, 2015). About 40% of undergraduate students are working at least 30 h a week and more than 70% of all college students work while in college. The most fundamental obstacle that these “working learners” will face is likely the need to balance the dual demands of an undergraduate education and employment. While the profile of the average college student has changed, the admissions processes and measures used to predict college student performance have remained unchanged (Sternberg, 2010; Sternberg, 2015).

Both traditional and nontraditional students face similar challenges upon entry to college. All students must successfully make the transition from high school to college by adjusting to new academic and social challenges and acquiring the necessary attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge (Mayhew et al., 2016; Perzmadian & Credé, 2016). For example, as compared with high school, the nature of higher education is often characterized by greater academic demands, a higher set of standards and expectations, and the lack of an externally imposed structure. Given the more challenging nature of higher education as well as the many challenges confronting working learners, students who are change-oriented and tend to “take control to make things

happen rather than watching things happen” (Parker & Bindl, 2017, p. 1) would be more likely to successfully adapt and experience success. This study uses proactive personality (Bateman & Crant, 1993) as a noncognitive predictor of performance. Proactive personality is defined by the personal disposition of an individual who is not constrained by environmental forces and is able to create change in their environment (Crant, 1995; Crant, 1996).

Academic performance can be affected not only by cognitive ability but by one's ability to change one's environment. Thus, proactive personality is likely to be a key factor in determining the success of college students. For example, first-year students who are high in proactive personality would be more likely to actively plan and take action (Major, Holland, & Oborn, 2012) to address the many uncertainties faced in the first year of college (e.g., visiting an instructor during office hours to seek clarification about a novel assignment). These students would also be more likely to demonstrate personal initiative and look for opportunities to improve themselves (Tymon & Batistic, 2016) or their situation (e.g., joining a study group with fellow classmates when enrolled in a difficult course). A construct such as proactive personality may allow researchers to capture additional variance in academic performance and discretionary behaviors in academic settings that are currently unaccounted for by purely cognitive predictors.

Despite calls to expand the predictors of academic performance to include noncognitive predictors (Duckworth, 2009; Kyllonen, 2012a;

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Shultz & Zedeck, 2012; Sternberg & Sternberg, 2017), cognitive measures such as high school grade point average (GPA) and standardized test scores (e.g. SAT, ACT) have been the primary predictors of academic performance in higher education for decades. The vast majority of studies on academic performance have defined this criterion in terms of college GPA. While on a purely task-oriented basis, this measure may be best, many organizational scholars have asked that the criterion domain of performance be expanded (Kaufman & Agars, 2009; Mattern et al., 2014) to include organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and counterproductive work behavior (CWB) that are not captured by measures of task performance (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Paine, & Bacharach, 2000). OCB has been defined as “performance that supports the social and psychological environment in which task performance takes place” (Organ, 1997, p. 95). CWB has been broadly defined as “any intentional behavior on the part of an organizational member viewed by the organization as contrary to its legitimate interests” (Sackett, 2002, p. 5). Research conducted on these constructs has shown that OCBs and CWBs are empirically distinct from task performance (Dalal, 2005; Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994; Sackett, 2002). In this study, we adopt Meriac’s (2012) conceptualization of academic performance that expands the criterion domain to include academic task performance (i.e., college GPA) as well as positive discretionary behaviors (i.e., OCBs) and negative discretionary behaviors (i.e., CWBs).

OCB in the context of an academic setting is often referred to as academic citizenship behavior (ACB). Students’ roles have expanded beyond the traditional scope of the behaviors of studying and taking exams. The construct of ACBs allows researchers to explore this dimension of discretionary behaviors that are not required but valued by educational institutions (e.g., helping other students, engaging in extracurricular activities). These positive discretionary behaviors are especially important to higher education because they represent student behavior that affects the image of the educational institution. Many students are civically engaged (Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Ostrander, 2004), help one another on tasks, and are expected to engage in service learning activities (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). This type of civic engagement is closely related to the concept of proactive personality, which posits that some people are more likely to create change in their environment. Thus, a student may not achieve as much in classes but may be highly involved in work on campus that brings benefit to classmates as well as the academic institution. Recently, interest in ACBs at college and university settings has grown (e.g., Ehtiyar, Alan, & Ömürş, 2010; Hussin & Chin, 2017; Khalid, Jusoff, Othman, Ismail, & Rahman, 2010; LeBlanc, 2014). This increased research focus demonstrates a recognition by institutions of higher education of the value of ACBs. Specifically, ACBs are often used as one indicator of student integration and engagement, which has been found to predict student retention (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Mayhew et al., 2016). In the present study, ACBs are defined as helping behaviors directed toward other students and responsible participation or engagement in school.

In addition to positive discretionary behaviors, students can engage in negative discretionary behaviors. These behaviors can include mild levels of counterproductive behavior such as stealing the cellphone of another student and other forms of microaggression (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). They may escalate to providing classmates with answers to exam questions (Trushell, Byrne, & Simpson, 2012) or aggression against other students. In the context of an academic setting, these behaviors can be referred to as counterproductive academic behaviors (CABs). CABs can have a deleterious effect on individual student experience and negatively affect a university’s brand image (Chapleo, 2010; Duesterhaus & Duesterhaus, 2014; Tolbert, 2014). Depending on the nature of the CAB in question, the effects on university brand image may be devastating. In this study, CABs are defined as negative discretionary behaviors such as absenteeism or tardiness that are indicative of disengagement.

Proactive personality was initially conceptualized by Bateman and Crant (1993) as one who is unrestrained by situational forces to effect change. This conceptualization uses an interactionist framework to understand the relationship between the individual and their environment. Examples of actions taken by an individual who would be classified as high on this construct include “scanning for opportunities, demonstrating initiative, being active rather than passive, and persevering to bring about change in the faces of obstacles” (Crant, Hu, & Jiang, 2017, p. 194). Proactive personality has been used as an effective predictor of career success (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999), entrepreneurial intention (Crant, 1996), and creativity (Kim, Hon, & Crant, 2009). Regarding work performance, Crant (1995) found that proactive personality predicted work performance among a group of real estate agents. In both short-term and long-term contexts, proactive personality has been shown to predict task performance, whether in one’s individual job or in one’s career (Crant et al., 2017). Several recent meta-analyses have also examined the proactive personality construct. For example, Spitzmuller, Sin, Howe, and Fatimah (2015) reported that proactive personality was significantly related to overall job performance, task performance, and OCB.

Because students with higher levels of proactive personality have a tendency to take initiative and seek necessary information (Balluerka, Gorostiaga, & Ulacia, 2014), engage in activities that are beyond their formal roles as college students (Campbell, 2000; Tymon & Batistic, 2016), and seek opportunities to improve their situation when confronted with obstacles (Major et al., 2012), we expect that proactive personality will predict college GPA, ACB, and CAB in this study. We are not aware of any study to date that has investigated these relationships within the same sample in an academic context. The present research will also examine what additional variance can be explained by proactive personality in these performance outcomes after accounting for high school GPA and standardized test scores.

While proactive personality has been shown to be related to the aforementioned performance-related outcomes, other measures of personality have been shown to be correlated with proactive personality as well as these outcomes within the expanded criterion domain of performance (Allen, Weeks, & Moffitt, 2005; Bateman & Crant, 1993). One of these personality variables is characterized by the tendency to be dependable, organized, hardworking, self-disciplined, and detail-oriented (i.e., conscientiousness; Costa Jr & McCrae, 1992) and has been found to be the most consistent noncognitive predictor of performance outcomes in organizational settings (e.g., Oswald & Hough, 2011; Salgado & Táuriz, 2014; Shaffer & Postlethwaite, 2012). For example, many studies on the correlates of job performance have found that broad measures of conscientiousness predict the most variance in job performance beyond cognitive ability, as compared with other personality variables (e.g., O’Boyle Jr., Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2011; Oh et al., 2014). Additionally, conscientiousness has been found to be an important predictor of OCB (e.g., Chiaburu, Oh, Berry, Li, & Gardner, 2011; Judge, Rodell, Klinger, Simon, & Crawford, 2013) and CWB (e.g., Berry, Carpenter, & Barratt, 2012; Kluepfer, McLarty, & Bing, 2015). Further, in an academic setting, conscientiousness has been observed to be the most significant personality variable that predicts academic achievement in postsecondary education (e.g., Kappe & Van Der Flier, 2012; McAbee & Oswald, 2013; Vedel, 2014). Importantly, conscientiousness explains incremental variance in academic performance beyond high school grades and standardized test scores (e.g., Poropat, 2009; Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012; Smidt, 2015).

Because of these reported findings in both organizational and educational settings, another objective of this study is to examine how proactive personality compares with a well-established predictor of study outcomes (i.e., conscientiousness). Evidence that proactive personality predicts college GPA, ACB, and CAB along with conscientiousness can provide colleges with an additional valid predictor to include in their selection system and thereby reduce adverse impact by

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