THE ROLE AND RELATIONSHIP OF HOPE, OPTIMISM AND GOAL SETTING IN ACHIEVING ACADEMIC SUCCESS: A STUDY OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN ONLINE ACCOUNTING COURSES

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ABSTRACT

Intelligence, ability, and motivation can attribute to academic success. Additionally, academic success may be dependent upon several other important variables such as hope, optimism and goal setting. Since the 1950's, literature in these areas evolved from purely psychological study to application of these constructs in academic settings. Researchers examined the function of these psychological constructs as they applied to accounting students enrolled in online courses. Responses from 219 student surveys provide the basis for the research findings. Results of this study suggest implications for all students enrolled in online courses and identify strategies that educators could employ to increase student performance and retention.

INTRODUCTION

Educators express concern with regard to academic quality, student persistence, ability, and other issues in both traditional and online classes. Both students and higher education heavily rely on distance education as a means to deliver educational programs. In the past, research efforts included issues of student success and race, age, income and gender (Brunner, 1991; Fan & Chen, 1997; Hayes & Richardson, 1995; Sullivan, 2001). Research indicates that students' attitudes can affect their success in distance learning courses (Hogan, 1997; Hoy, Tarter & Hoy, 2006; Katz, 2002). Specifically, hope, optimism, and social support can attribute to student success (Barnum, et al,; 1998; Juntunen & Wettersten, 2006; Katz, 2002; Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Westburg & Martin, 2003). In addition, research findings indicate goals can be an important success factor among students enrolled in distance learning courses (Pekrun & Maier, 2006; Harackiewicz, et al, 2000).

Distance education also presents colleges and universities with new market opportunities and increased access to higher education for many students who otherwise might not consider enrolling in college. Distance education still provides new challenges for educators. Empire State University

reports distance education as an excellent way for their non-traditional students (who have an average age of 36) to pursue a college education (Taking a, 2006). Empire States' Linzi Kemp suggests that online education requires different student retention strategies than on-campus student populations which tend to be traditional age (Taking a, 2006).

One potential concern questions whether or not distance education courses affect student retention rates. In one study of United Kingdom graduate students enrolled in master's courses, no significant difference in success or retention among university students could be noted (Knight 2007). Kung (2002) also indicated that distance learning could provide additional skills than what students could obtain in a more traditional classroom.

Kung (2002) noted that problems can exist with student motivation for choosing distance learning courses. The author's research revealed that course topic appeared to be the most significant factor for choosing a distance learning course and that course topic influenced students to enroll in the class as an elective or required class. Consequently, students may also be motivated by technology benefits instead of the educational benefit and instead may choose distance education coursework (particularly online Accounting) on that basis. Katz (2002) also reported that when students select online coursework on the basis of convenience and technology rather than a method of course delivery that might better suit their particular learning, student success might be compromised.

Studies indicate the role of hope in student success should not be overlooked (Bressler, 2006; Bryant & Cvengros, 2004). Even when allowing for student intelligence levels, Curry, et al (1999) and Curry, et al (1997) found that students with higher hope or optimism achieved higher levels of academic performance. Curry et al (1997), also found higher levels of hope to be a predictor of superior athletic performance. Barnum, et al (1998) reported students with high hope and optimism will also recover more quickly from major injuries and illnesses. Likewise, a study conducted by Chemers, Hu & Garcia (2001) also noted higher levels of optimism result in higher levels of academic performance.

Continued research of online educational programs could provide new findings for educators to develop more effective teaching and retention strategies which might improve student success (Carnevale & Olsen, 2003). Researchers indicate that depending upon class structure, student self esteem could be increased when enrolled in online courses (Vamosi, Pierce & Slotkin, 2004; Weiger, 1988). Self efficacy could also be a factor in increasing academic success. Self efficacy refers to student confidence in completing coursework and meeting necessary academic standards. Other studies, (Smith & Hoy, 2007; Hogan, 1997; Hoskins & Newstead, 1997; Huston, 1997) reflected that areas such as hope, optimism, goal setting, and academic optimism affect student and individual achievement. Despite additional studies specific to accounting courses in distance learning formats (Gagne & Shepherd, 2001); limited research exists with regard to student academic optimism while registered in online Accounting Information Systems courses (Dunbar, 2004; Vamosi, Pierce & Slotkin, 2004; Williams, 2003).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hope

Literature within the various areas of psychology and psychiatry initially introduced hope components in the 1950's (Harackiewicz, Tauer & Elliot, 2000; Harber & Schneider, 2005; Magaletta & Oliver, 1999). Gillham (2000) noted that hope could be an assiduous force that influences people to rise above psychological challenges. Additionally, hope might also be characterized as a cognitive strategy to accomplish personal goals in organizations such as colleges and universities (Gillham, 2000; Kramer & Conoley, 1992; Snyder, 1994; Snyder, Rand & Signom, 2002). Simmons et al., (2003) acknowledged that hope involves a positive feeling that reveals a projected benefit from personal circumstances.

Hope embraces cognitive and affective elements (Gillham, 2000; Juntenen & Wettersten, 2006; Tierney, 1995). Cognitive areas might pertain to the students' perception of their networking ability and awards aggregated. The affective component also can involve interrelated negative and positive consequences and may amass situations where students in universities or colleges endure positive feelings from receiving tangible awards for academic success. The cognitive component could necessitate student aspirations or motives behind their personal goals.

Hope comprises the various roles of barriers, stressors, and emotions (Dill & Henley, 1998; Gillham, 2000). Hope can be classified an eminence of emotional intelligence, which individuals develop to overcome dissimilar stressors (Gillham, 2000). All areas of organizations involve various types of stressors. People perceive conditions as stressful when incoming hurdles obstruct goal endeavors. However, people may need to acquire hope to handle difficulties more effectively. Individuals with high levels of hope many times will overcome challenges with ease. Hope occasionally can be connected with willingness to improve various personal predicaments (Snyder, et al, 1991).

Hope also includes various levels of thinking involving the ability to accomplish preferred goals. Students with high levels of hope can exhibit a stronger aptitude to reach their goals; whereas students with a low level of hope might struggle to develop efficient strategies. Students with stronger hope may set more difficult goals than a person with a lower level of hope. Depending upon their level of hope, students may or may not act to accomplish their intended goals. However, people with high levels of hope will be more apt to develop stronger avenues of approach to arrive at their desired goals (Snyder et al., 2002).

People with stronger hope may be more willing to approach colleagues with whom they do not share commonalties (Snyder et al., 2002). The reason might be that an individual relates more with other hopeful individuals but will not be afraid to connect with someone who possesses a more daring outlook. In another words, an individual with high hope might be more willing to take a chance than one with lower hopeful perceptions of a situation. Social situations can occur in colleges

among enthusiastic students who seek other students with an upbeat motivation and attitude. Unfortunately, individuals with lower levels of hope may not attempt to associate with high-hope individuals and their choice of friends could be limited to less dependable associates or colleagues. These individuals may lack a feeling of acceptance resulting in their leaving the organization. Additionally, people with strong levels of hope communicate positively and persistently and this attitude can be valuable for leaders in organizations including both colleges and businesses. Also, hopeful leadership most likely will result in higher retention rates and more lucrative organizations than individuals with abysmal hope (Pekrun & Maier, 2006; Snyder et al., 2002).

Hope and Academic Optimism

Limited studies exist on academic optimism and involve mostly primary education students as well as teacher academic optimism (Hoy, Tarter & Hoy, 2006; Mascall, Straus & Sacks, 2008; Smith & Hoy, 2007). Hoy, Tarter, & and Hoy (2006) discussed the necessity of additional research in a variety of educational settings in order to build a more comprehensive theory of academic optimism in schools. The results of the authors' study concluded that academic optimism is a strong force for student success. Smith and Hoy, p. 556 (2007) concurred and added that the new collective construct, academic optimism can be positively correlated with student success. Although some articles can be noted on academic optimism in elementary and high schools, limited research exists on academic optimism in a university setting and even less can be found on academic optimism involving online courses in higher education (El-Anzi, 2005).

Hope and Student Grades

One study conducted by Snyder et al. (2002) suggested that students might not actually perform at levels expected of their academic potential. Despite the importance of intelligence and ability, several additional factors could be noted causing academically substandard student performance. Snyder et al. (2002) studied students from their entry in college, again at the end of the first and second semesters, and finally at graduation. The researchers used student grade point average as an important measure in this study relating hope and academic success. Snyder et al (2002) found students with higher levels of hope performed better academically in terms of grades and increased graduation rate. Snyder (1994) noted that students with higher levels of hope might be more able to clearly conceptualize goals, while students who reported lower levels of hope encompassed uncertain and ambiguous goal traits. Furthermore, students with high hope can also demonstrate optimistic characteristics as they focus on their goals.

Optimism

Optimism can be defined as an expectation that people will endure positive experiences (Gillham, 2000). Optimism many times will be a significant contributor for behavior and can motivate individuals to persist in pursuing goals with enthusiasm. Despite the probability of the occurrence of negative results, optimism involves a belief of favorable results.

Optimistic people take on more positive coping actions during demanding circumstances (Chemers, Watson, & May, 2000; Gagne & Shepherd, 2001; Gillham, 2000). Optimism might also help people to readily face challenges, such as quickly meeting challenging academic deadlines. Optimism may be vital for students during time and workload constraints and the ability to deal with time and workload constrains will be especially important to students taking distance learning courses.

Moreover, optimism can be relevant to career, mental, and educational adjustments. According to El-Anzi (2005), optimism correlates with strong levels of career and/or personal goals. An optimistic student may trust that academic accomplishment can make college a positive experience despite previous negative personal experiences. Pessimism; however, can be linked with poor goal attainment and psychological anguish. Pessimistic people might also employ self-defeating conduct which can negatively impact life (Carver & Scheier, 2002). In fact, pessimists' behavior may lead to depression, substance abuse, and possibly suicide when confronting a multitude of life tasks.

However, optimists may not show any advantage. Occasionally, situations can occur where an optimistic strategy may not be feasible, and the individual might incur risk such as overrating the capability to diffuse an adverse situation (Carver & Scheier, 2002). The optimists might be more vulnerable to a calamity than a pessimist. Pessimists can anticipate disastrous possible situations, though optimists may struggle handling traumatic events. In contrast, optimists naturally manage better for the duration of difficult times (Carver & Scheier, 2002). This suggests that more optimistic students may be more likely to persist to complete coursework or a degree program.

Relationship between Hope and Optimism

Researchers utilize both hope and optimism to reveal a future direction (Chemers et al., 2000). Hope and optimism can exemplify two different variables, despite similarities (Lopez & Snyder, 2002). Consequently, both variables consist of discrete components. Different from hope, optimism can be characterized as the extensive expectation that people may experience positive events. On the contrary, hope may entail reliance and a "desire accompanied with expectation of obtaining what is desired or belief that it is obtainable" (Merriam, 1971, p. 1089). However, comparing hope and optimism may be too complicated to differentiate. Frequently, researchers apply hope and optimism interchangeably (Bryant and Cvengros, 2004). Hope and optimism might be

measured as truly disparate variables. An extensive literature review resulted in the following four hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 Grade performance and hope are correlated.

Hypothesis 2 Academic optimism and hope are correlated.

Hypothesis 3 Optimism and goals are not related.

Hypothesis 4 Goals and grade performance are not related.

METHOD

The study involved distributing the questionnaire to students enrolled in an AIS online course at University of Houston-Downtown, Texas during the period of 2005-2006. Two hundred thirty-two questionnaires were returned resulting in 219 usable surveys, or a response rate of 94%.

Survey respondents include a culturally diverse sample of respondents. The ethnicities consist of Pacific Islander ($n = 5$), Asian ($n = 33$), American Indian ($n = 2$), African American ($n = 49$), Caucasian ($n = 77$), Hispanic ($n = 44$), Mixed ($n = 4$), and other ($n = 5$). Additionally, the respondents' age varied from 20-55, incorporating 31 as the mean age. The researchers selected male ($n = 49$) and female ($n = 170$) respondents. The study also consisted of 168 respondents currently working on their four-year degree and 51 respondents having already acquired a 4-year degree but continue to take courses in order to qualify to take the Certified Public Accountants (CPA) exam.

MEASURES

The initial section of the survey composed of a demographics section (see Table 1 & Table 2) that asked for race, gender, marital status, age, place of residence, level of education, employment, number of online courses taken, and number of people in their household (Brown, 1998; Brunner, 1991; Dill & Henley, 1998). The next section of the survey included the Academic Optimism scale, Staats Hope Scale (Lopez & Snyder (2002), Janis Inadequacy Scale Life Orientation Test, (Lopez & Snyder, 2002) (Lopez & Snyder, 2002), and the Adult Dispositional Hope Scale (Juntunen & Wettersen, 2006; Snyder, et al, 2002).

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gender	219	1.00	5.00	1.7900	.47089
Marital Status	219	1.00	31.00	1.7534	2.05730
Age	219	.00	55.00	29.4155	9.38943
Size of Household	219	.00	6.00	2.9498	1.36544
Income	219	.00	5.00	3.8311	1.34224
Place of Residence	219	1.00	13.00	2.0411	1.66814
Employment Category	219	1.00	13.00	6.8767	4.84894
Education	219	.00	18.00	4.6621	2.23504
Possess Bachelor's Degree?	219	1.00	7.00	1.3516	.83481
Employment Status	219	1.00	8.00	3.5982	2.03258
Race	219	1.00	8.00	4.6530	2.03143
# of Online Courses	218	.00	15.00	3.5688	2.67560

Table 2: Frequency (Gender, Race, Bachelor Degree, Income)		
	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	49	22.4
Female	169	77.2
Total	219	100.0
Race		
American Indian	2	.9
Asian	33	15.1
Black	49	22.4
Hispanic	44	20.1
Pacific	5	2.3
Mixed	4	1.8
White	77	35.2
Other	5	2.3
Total	219	100.0

Table 2: Frequency (Gender, Race, Bachelor Degree, Income)		
	Frequency	Percent
Bachelor's Degree		
Working on	168	76.7
Already have	40	18.3
Total	219	100.0
Income		
<15,000	18	8.2
15-25,000	26	11.9
25-35,000	28	12.8
35-50,000	49	22.4
>50,000	98	44.7
Total	219	100.0

Hypothesis # 1

The researchers utilized a Pearson Correlation to measure and analyze hope and grade performance among the participants. A comparison between two variables identified a relationship between grade and hope. A comparison between the two variables showed a significant relationship, r (219) = -.17, p <.05 (See Table 3).

Table 3: Grade Performance and Hope			
		Grade	Hope
Grade	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.168*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.013
	N	219.000	219
Hope	Pearson Correlation	-.168*	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.013	
	N	219	219.000
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).			

Hypothesis # 2

Correlation analysis measured the relationship between academic optimism and hope among the participants. Statistical analysis demonstrated a relationship between academic optimism and hope. A

comparison between the two variables showed a significant relationship, r (219) = .25, p <.05 (See Table 4).

Table 4: Academic Optimism and Hope			
		Academic Optimism	Hope
Academic Optimism	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.248**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	219.000	219
Hope	Pearson Correlation	.248**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	219	219.000
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Hypothesis # 3

The authors used a correlation analysis to uncover a possible relationship between grade performance and goals among the participants. Results of the correlation analysis found no relationship between grade performance and goals. A comparison between the two variables showed no significant relationship r (219) = .06, p >.05 (See Table 5).

Table 5: Grade Performance and Goals			
		Goals	Grade
Goals	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.061
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.367
	N	219.000	219
Grade	Pearson Correlation	.061	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.367	
	N	219	219.000

Hypothesis # 4

The researchers used a correlation analysis to measure optimism and goals among the participants. Statistical analysis yielded no relationship between optimism and goals. A comparison between the two variables showed no significant relationship. r (219) = .047, p >.05 (See Table 6).

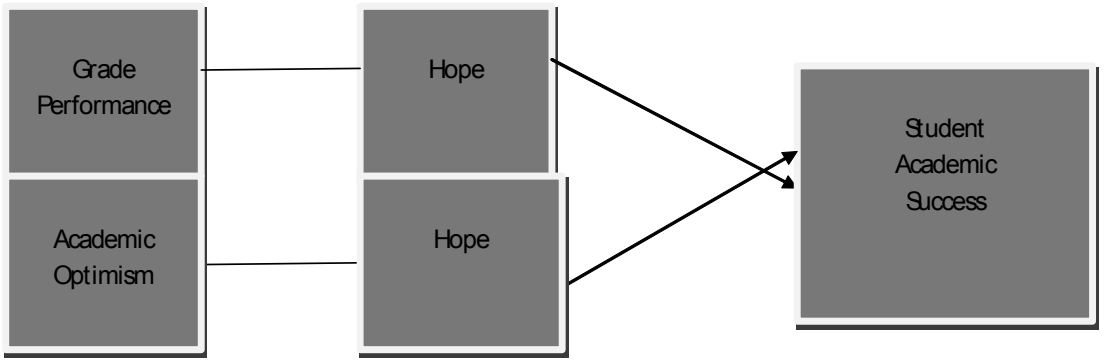
Table 6: Optimism and Goals			
		Optimism	Goals
Optimism	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.047
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.490
	N	219.000	219
Goals	Pearson Correlation	.047	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.490	
	N	219	219.000

DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis tested whether a significant relationship between grade performance and hope existed, which indicated that hope may also significantly improve students' academic performance. The researchers found a significant relationship between grade performance and hope. Bressler, Bressler, & Bressler (2008) noted that hope influences an individual's confidence in her or his ability which may enhance future accomplishments. Students' hope may strengthen their academic potential to include increased performance in class.

The second hypothesis tested whether a significant relationship between academic optimism and hope might be found. The authors found a relationship between academic optimism and hope. In fact, hope can also contribute to meeting personal goals and endeavors and both hope and optimism might work in together to enhance student performance (Snyder et al, 1991).

Figure 1
Hope, Academic Optimism, and Grade Performance



LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, this particular study surveyed only accounting majors. Second, surveyed students did not necessarily consist of new college students or commonly known in a traditional educational setting as "entering freshmen". Freshman students could be expected to have lower retention rates. Rather, as this group represented mostly accounting majors enrolled in upper-division accounting courses, researchers could assume that their retention rates would already be higher.

In addition, this study represents students from one university. Studies from other university settings could yield different results as universities differ on a number of levels such as geographic location, urban setting as compared to rural setting, residential student population versus commuter, traditional students versus nontraditional students, etc. Additionally, this study only examined students enrolled in an Accounting Information Systems course. Studies of students in different disciplines or in different stages (entry-level or advanced courses) of their academic major might also produce different findings.

Researchers could also examine other psychological factors of motivation to identify the best methods and means to increase confidence and motivate students. This would be especially useful after identifying which students might require additional motivators. Educators could find predicting which students require most motivation as well as what factors motivates them most, which could possibly increase student retention.

Additional research involving the influence of faculty members with students with regard to hope, optimism, and goals and how that influence contributes to student success might be an interesting future study. Further research on these factors might assist providers of online courses with information that would help better understand key factors of student success.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Research findings from this study could denote significant implications. Higher hope and academic optimism can lead to stronger grade performance. Student hope and academic optimism could be bolstered through development of learning communities within the college or university. Students identified as having higher levels of hope, optimism and clearly defined goals could be selected to lead the learning community. Students who find friends in college could develop their positive attitudes which may contribute to persistence; thereby increasing retention and graduation rates (Snyder, 2002). Recognizing that hope, optimism, and goals contribute to student confidence, awards and recognition programs could be developed in individual courses as well as throughout various stages of the curriculum.

Colleges and universities continue to adopt online education as a delivery system to increase access to education. Business, perhaps more so than other disciplines, continues to evolve and change as impacted by technological advances (Carnevale & Olsen, 2003). Effective response to this challenge calls

for educators to recognize the various factors which could improve student success rates and develop techniques which can be employed in an online educational format.

Other studies (Youssef & Luthans, 2009) uncovered the importance of hope and optimism in the workplace. Similarly, the impact of hope and optimism on academic success cannot be understated. Researchers need to continue examining these constructs to develop better strategies to improve student success, particularly those students enrolled in online courses.

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