Chapter 21
Academic Motivation:
For the Love of Learning

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ABSTRACT

What leads to academic success? Why are some students able to achieve academically and others not? A breadth of research exists supporting the notion of motivation as having a significant impact on academic success. This chapter investigated historical and theoretical developments of motivation from the Greek Philosophers, through the Industrial Revolution, to the perspective of motivation in fulfilling psychological needs. Once the general concept of motivation is fully exhausted, academic motivation is explored from theoretical foundations to current research on factors influencing academic motivation and the impact of academic motivation on academic achievement. This foundation has practical implications for assessment of motivation and curricular and program development as a result.

INTRODUCTION

A breadth of research exists supporting the impact of motivation on learning and achievement (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Fortier, 1995; Kappe & Flier, 2012; Kusurkar, Ten Cate, Vos, Westers, & Croiset, 2013; Lavender, 2005; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; M, 2013; Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014; Patterson Lorenzetti, 2013; Prowse & Delbridge, 2013; Rogers, 2010; Vecchione, Alessandri, & Marsicano, 2014). In fact, some researchers argue that motivation alone can determine the academic success of an individual (Liu, Bridgeman, & Adler, 2012). A learner may have the intellect to succeed, but without motivation, that potential is lost (Adebayo, 2008; Barrera, 2010; Ting, 2003). For without motivation, why does one do anything at all?

Early research reported significant relationships between academic success (sometimes operationalized as retention) and intrinsic motivation to learn, student engagement, effort, self-confidence, and competence (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994; Deci & Moller, 2005; Epstein, 1989). Recent research has addressed the predictive value of motivation on academic success in thesis and dissertation research (Huang, 2011; Normyle, 2011; Sarnataro, 2011; Siemens, 2011). For example, Huang (2011)

reported that academic self-efficacy, achievement motivation, and student engagement influenced cumulative GPA for undergraduate students. These findings are regularly observed across all educational levels from primary, secondary, post-secondary, and to graduate students (Martin, 2009); consistently confirming the impact of motivation on academic achievement across all age groups.

This chapter will explore the correlation between academic motivation and achievement starting first with an overview of the historical and theoretical foundations of the general concept of motivation and moving towards the specific concept of academic motivation. Historical and theoretical foundations of academic achievement will also be explored followed by an examination of the literature on the topic, a review of assessment strategies, and finally implications on curricular and program development.

FUNDAMENTALS OF MOTIVATION

Historical Foundations

It has been suggested that historically, primitive people were motivated by the will to survive (Maslow, 1943). As such, the motivation of primitive people was based on meeting physiological needs for both individual survival and survival of the human race. While the motivation of primitive people in the Stone Age has been speculated by modern theorists as a function of physical needs (1943), the earliest legitimate record of the study of motivation dates to the ancient Greek philosophers during the Classical Period. Between 350 to 430 BCE, the Ancient Greeks first understood motivation in relation to the concept of goals, which were categorized into needs of the mind and body (Aristotle & Hammond, 1902; Plato, Grube, & Reeve, 1992; Plato & Tredennick, 1954). Plato's theory of human motivation in *The Republic of Plato* (Adam, 1979) was the stepping stone between Socrates' philosophy that knowledge through the mind alone creates motivation for action (Wagner, 2001) and Aristotle's theory of dualism between mind and body suggesting that only thought in relation to meeting human needs leads to motivation. In the *Republic,* Plato described three independent parts of the soul defined as reason, spirit, and appetite. Plato posited that behavior is motivated by both thoughts and feelings related to virtuosity (Wagner, 2001). That is, both thought and feeling must yield the virtuous and right action in a given circumstance. Aristotle's theory of motivation derived from his statement in *Nicomachian Ethics* (*Nichomachean ethics*, 1975), which further expanded on Socrates and Plato's perspectives. Aristotle's theory used the root *move* to define motivation. In stark contrast to Socrates, Aristotle wrote that it is not cognition or thought alone that can move, but only thought "*for the sake of something"* or that which is practical, which can move one to action. That is, thought leads to motivationally significant cognitive representations, which represent specific goals leading to behavior (Boekaerts, Pintrich, & Zeider, 2000). If a thought is practical, therefore, it has meaning in relation to an individual's needs, values, interpersonal relationships, and other aspects of self and social context.

Descartes further advanced the study of motivation with the introduction of interactionism in 1641. Descartes proposed the mind and body as separate, yet impacting one another in a psychophysical manner. Our beliefs, emotions, and desires (the mind) have an impact on our physical sensations (the body) and vice versa, concluding that motivation is a direct result of the relationship between mind and body (Descartes et al., 1680).

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