

Academic Success – How Do Students Define It?

**SACSA/NASPA Region III/TACUSPA Joint
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The Study

- Multi-year project to discover the impact (or lack of impact) of students' out-of-classroom involvement on their academic success
- 2005-2006
 - Faculty Focus Groups
 - A cohort of undergraduate students that participated in a series of surveys over the course of the academic year

2005-2006 Undergraduate Cohort

Demographic Category	Active Participants (n=741)	OISP Fall 2005 undergraduate data (n=36,130)
Gender		
Female	60%	49%
Male	40%	51%
Classification		
Freshmen	20%	24%
Sophomore	22%	21%
Junior	25%	24%
Senior	34%	30%
Other	--	<1%
Ethnicity		
African American	1%	3%
American Indian	<1%	<1%
Asian American	3%	4%
Caucasian	83%	80%
Hispanic	11%	11%
Other	1%	<1%

Spring 2006

- 2.862 mean GPR at Texas A&M University
- 2.936 cumulative mean GPR for this study's total cohort
- 3.006 cumulative mean GPR for this study's participants who gave permission to use their individual GPR information

Project Overview

- Web-Based Surveys
 - Topics included: communication (written and oral), time management, use of technology, peer groups, career development, employment, travel
- Self-Report Data
- Permission to view academic information granted by 75% of the cohort (n=557)
- Academic Variables
 - Cumulative Grade Point Average
 - Semester Grade Point Averages
 - Course Hours Attempted and Completed per semester



Academic Success and Career Development Survey Overview

- Conducted April 2006
- All cohort members received web based survey
- Initial solicitation and five reminders between April 10 and May 15, 2006
- 64% response rate (n=472)



Demographic Category	Academic Success and Career Development Survey Participants (n=472)
Gender	
Female	63%
Male	37%
Classification	
Freshmen	20%
Sophomore	22%
Junior	23%
Senior	35%
Residence	
On-Campus	30%
Off-Campus	70%
Ethnicity	
African American	2%
American Indian	<1%
Asian American	3%
Caucasian	84%
Hispanic	9%
Other	1%

How the Literature Approaches Academic Success

- Academic success as a performance goal
 - Emphasizes competition
 - GPR, Class rank and their use in awarding of scholarships, grading on a “bell curve”
- Academic success as a mastery goal
 - Focuses on student’s acquisition of skills and interest in a subject as well as effort expended when studying the subject

How the Literature Approaches Academic Success

- Research conducted on these goal orientations generally favors mastery over performance goals (Harackiewicz, et al. 2002)
- Students may change their definitions of success throughout their time in college. The idea is called “self-authorship”. (Baxter Magolda, 2001)
 - Self-authorship describes success in terms of a person’s ability to internally define individual values and beliefs before being able to construct knowledge.
 - Four stages: absolute knowing; transitional knowing; independent knowing; contextual knowing

The Academic Success Themes as Described by Students in This Study

- Doing my best – 164 comments
- Learning – 119 comments
- Grades – 119 comments
- Application – 115 comments
- Rewards – 104 comments
- Not grades – 44 comments
- Becoming a balanced, well-rounded person – 42 comments

Doing My Best

- Sub themes
 - Doing my best – period
 - Achieving one's personal goals
 - Working hard
 - Being satisfied/proud of one's accomplishments
- Typical of the student voice:
“Performing to the best of your ability”
(female, freshman, Biomedical Science)

More “Doing My Best” – the Student Voice

“Doing the best you can with what you have, and never getting satisfied.” (male, senior, Management)

“Achieving your OWN goals, making the grade that was the highest YOU could make....” (female, freshman, Architecture)

“I think if you try your hardest and put your full effort into doing so that is academic success.” (female, freshman, Geosciences)

“Having a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment in your academics.” (female, sophomore, Biology)

Learning

- Sub themes
 - Learning for learning's sake – 51 comments
 - Understanding or having knowledge – 36 comments
 - Retaining knowledge – 13 comments
 - Integrated learning – 7 comments
 - Continuing and life long learning – 6 comments
- 34% of the comments came from freshmen who comprised 20% of the survey respondents and 20% of the comments from seniors who comprised 35% of the survey respondents

Learning – the Student Voice

“Learning the topic. I have had instances when I didn’t do very well on a test but come out of it really feeling like I learned the material and it was just bad test taking. When I find myself talking to my dad and trying to tell him about what I know, I know I’ve really learned it.” (female, sophomore, Agriculture)

“Understanding the material for a longer period of time and not just for the exams.” (female, junior, Liberal Arts)

“The ultimate academic success is constructing the ability to be a life long learner.” (male, freshman, Business)

Grades

- 30% (n=34) of the comments indicated that grades were the only definition of academic success
- 70% (n=75) of the comments indicated that grades were one of two or more criteria for a definition of academic success
- 68% of the comments were about “good grades” and 32% identified specific grades or grade ranges

Grades – the Student Voice

“To do the best that you possibly can, for me that is all A’s.” (female, freshman, Biomedical Science)

“Whether I understand the information or not doesn’t ever seem to be relevant. Only GPR.” (female, junior, Biomedical Science)

“The best grades you can get, which in my case is all A’s. I consider a class that I’ve gotten a B in to be a failure, even if I learned something. I know that I shouldn’t, but I do anyways [sic]. (female, senior, Science)

More on Grades

- “Getting an A, there is nothing more to it. It doesn’t matter how much or how little you learned from the teacher, the grades are everything. Scholarships, privileges (study abroad, etc....) and graduate schools only care about the grade, not how hard the professor was or how much it changed your life.”
(male, freshman, General Studies)
- “At this point C. In the beginning it would have (been) A’s of course.” (male, senior, Geoscience)
- “I know that it should be the knowledge I learn, but our society is too concentrated on GPA rather than knowledge. So my answer would have to be if I get an ‘A’ or not.” (male, senior, Architecture)

Application

- For some this represented application to their major or careers
- For others it represented application to life or the “real world”
- For others it was a combination of both
- Many comments mentioned a combination of understanding, retaining, and applying knowledge regardless of the setting

Application – the Student Voice

“Academic success is feeling prepared to enter the real world and sometimes the job force with the training, skills, and knowledge acquired or learned throughout your academic career.” (female, freshman, Science)

“Thoroughly learning and understanding the material, and being able to apply it in your field. I think it is NOT being able to memorize and regurgitate information on tests.” (female, junior, Engineering)

More on Application

“In order to be truly successful in academics, you have to be able to retain the information you learned in class and apply it to a situation outside of class.” (female, senior, Liberal Arts)

“...but also being appropriately educated to communicate with people about a wide span of academic and world issues.” (female, junior, Education)

Rewards

- 64% of the comments said a degree was the reward and 31% said a job, career, or graduate school.
- More upperclassmen than underclassmen spoke to the theme of rewards.
- More upperclass men provided comments than women.

Rewards – the Student Voice

“G-r-a-d-u-a-t-i-n-g.” (male, junior, Liberal Arts)

“...getting a good job or into a good graduate/professional school.” (male, junior, Liberal Arts)

“My inclination is to say 3.0 cumulative GPA but in my circumstance, I will not be able to do that. So I believe I am obligated to define it as earning a degree and graduating in good standing with the University.” (Male, senior, Liberal arts)

Not Grades

- 6% of the comments (n=44) said that grades were not academic success.
- Some defined it simply as “not grades” while others identified that it was “learning – not grades” that defined academic success
- Although women were overrepresented in this survey (58%) they spoke with a louder voice in this category – 70%.

Not Grades – the Student Voice

“Grades are just a necessary evil that keeps you quasi-informed of your performance.” (male, junior, Engineering)

“I think academic success is doing everything in your power to do well in that class. I don’t think grades show true academic success. It’s what you learn about yourself.” (female, freshman, General Studies)

“I don’t think grades have too much to do with success which might sound weird, but a lot of times I learn the most in the classes I do the worst in – so really I succeeded in those classes.” (female, sophomore, General Studies)

Becoming a Balanced, Well-Rounded Person

- 5% of the comments addressed academic success as becoming or growing to be a balanced, well-rounded person.
- 74% of the comments espousing this theme were women.
- The student voice:
“To get all that I can out of my college experience, whether it is learned outside of the classroom or inside.” (female, freshman, General Studies)

Becoming a Balanced, Well-Rounded Person – the Student Voice

“Getting good grades is important, but learning how to get along with others and learning how to respect each other’s differences is as equally important. I strive to get mainly A’s in all my classes, but I do not spend my life studying, because I need friends and support systems just as much as I need to learn what is going on in my classes. A person has achieved academic success when they have found a balance between school life and personal life.” (female, junior, Education)

Becoming a Balanced, Well-Rounded Person – the Student Voice

“It is important to learn how to be a leader and not always follow the crowd, to learn how to think independently and develop your ideas and thoughts, to learn how to stay organized and keep track of your work, to learn how to successfully communicate and work with others, to broaden your view of the world and learn how to see things from many different perspectives.” (female, senior, Liberal Arts)

Some Additional Themes

- Getting By
 - A small group of comments (n=18) espoused the belief that academic success was doing what was necessary to “pass” or “get by”.
- Joy/Passion
 - Another small group of comments (n=19) said academic success was about having a passion for or enjoying the work, or, as a result of their studies, for life itself.
 - “Academic success is finding your calling/passion and running wild with it.” (female, sophomore, Education)

College Student Experiences Questionnaire - Student Gains

Student Estimate of Gains in a holistic set of learning outcomes:

- General education (acquaintance with literature, understanding history, knowledge about the world, etc.)
- Personal development (gains in getting along with others, functioning as a team member, understanding self, etc.)
- Science and Technology (gains in understanding new technology, understanding science, analyzing quantitative problems, etc.)
- Intellectual Skills (gains the ability to synthesize ideas, think analytically, write effectively, etc.)
- Practical and Vocational Competence (gains in vocational preparation, professional skills, etc.)

Other Than a Job, What Do Students Expect to Gain From College?

- Friends – 24% (n=222 comments of 941)
- Skill development – 12% (n=109)
 - Understanding people/interpersonal skills
 - Communication skills
 - Life skills
 - Social skills
 - Time Management skills
- Experience – 11% (n=102)
 - In general
 - The “college experience”
 - Life experiences
 - Life lessons/knowing how the things (the system) works

Other Than a Job, What Do Students Expect to Gain From College?

- Knowledge – 9% (n=82)
- Growth – 6% (n=57)
- Global perspective – 4% (n=42)
- Others
 - Maturity
 - Network/contacts
 - Build a life
 - Accomplishment
 - A life partner
 - Aggie network
 - Education
 - Fun

In Reflection

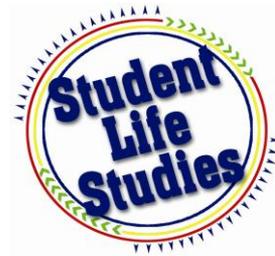
- Does what students think about academic success matter to their performance or mastery goals?
- Does what faculty or staff think about academic success matter in how they structure their program and learning outcomes?
- Would a discussion about this at the beginning of a class help close expectation gaps between the faculty member and his/her students?
- Should the institution have this discussion with its students throughout students' tenure?
- Is there a connection between how students define academic success and what they expect to gain from college?

For Further Study

- Analyze the data or collect new data based on the Baxter Magolda concept of “self-authorship”
- Cross reference students’ comments about academic success with their comments on expected college gains
- Analyze expected gains data against the CSEQ or what the literature says about expected gains from college
- Compare with other studies

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